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FRECKLES LEAPED UP, FRIGHTENED AND SNORTING.

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Ruth Fielding at Silver Ranch

OR

Schoolgirls Among The Cowboys

BY

ALICE B. EMERSON

AUTHOR OF "RUTH FIELDING OF THE RED MILL," "RUTH FIELDING AT BRIARWOOD HALL," ETC.

ILLUSTRATED

NEW YORK

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By ALICE B. EMERSON

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RUTH FIELDING AT SILVER RANCH
Or, Schoolgirls Among the Cowboys.

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RUTH FIELDING AT SILVER RANCH

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RUTH FIELDING AT SILVER RANCH

CHAPTER I

"OLD TROUBLE-MAKER"

WHERE the Silver Ranch trail branches from the state road leading down into Bullhide, there stretch a rambling series of sheds, or "shacks," given up to the uses of a general store and provision emporium; beside it is the schoolhouse. This place on the forked trails is called "The Crossing," and it was the only place nearer than the town of Bullhide where the scattered population of this part of Montana could get any supplies.

One of Old Bill Hicks' herds was being grazed on that piece of rolling country, lying in the foothills, right behind the Crossing, and two of his cow punchers had ridden in for tobacco. Being within sight of rows upon rows of tinned preserves (the greatest luxury extant to the cowboy mind), and their credit being good with Lem Dickson, who kept the store, the two cattle herders—while their cayuses stood with drooping heads, their bridle-reins on the road before them—each secured a can of peaches, and sitting cross-legged on the porch before the store, opened the

cans with their knives and luxuriated in the contents.

"Old man's nigh due, ain't he?" asked Lem, the storekeeper, lowering himself into a comfortable armchair that he kept for his own particular use on the porch.

"Gittin' to Bullhide this mawnin'," drawled one of the cowboys. "An' he's got what he went for, too."

"Bill Hicks most usually does git what he goes after, don't he?" retorted the storekeeper.

The other puncher chuckled. "This time Old Bill come near goin' out after *rabbit* an' only bringin' back the *hair,*" he said. "Jane Ann is just as much of a Hicks as Bill himself—you take it from me. She made her bargain b'fore Old Bill got her headed back to the ranch, I reckon. Thar's goin' to be more newfangled notions at Silver Ranch from now on than you kin shake a stick at. You hear me!"

"Old Bill can stand scattering a little money around as well as any man in this State," Lem said, ruminatively. "He's made it; he's saved it; now he might's well l'arn to spend some of it."

"And he's begun. Jane Ann's begun for him, leastways," said one of the cowboys. "D'ye know what Mulvey brought out on his wagon last Sat'day?"

"I knowed he looked like pitchers of 'movin'

day' in New York City, or Chicago, when he passed along yere," grunted the storekeeper. "Eight head o' mules he was drivin'."

"He sure was," agreed. the cow puncher "There was all sorts of trucks and gew-gaws. But the main thing was a pinanner."

"A piano?"

"That's what I said. And that half-Injun, Jib Potoway, says he kin play on the thing. But it ain't to be unboxed till the boss and Jane Ann comes."

"And they'll be gittin' along yere some time to-day," said the other cowboy, throwing his empty tin away. "And when they come, Lem, they're sure goin' to surprise yuh."

"What with?"

"With what they sail by yere in," drawled the puncher.

"Huh? what's eatin' on you, Bud? Old Bill ain't bought an airship, has he?"

"Mighty nigh as bad," chuckled the other. "He's bought Doosenberry's big automobile, I understand, and Jane Ann's brought a bunch of folks with her that she met down East, and they're just about goin' to tear the vitals out o' Silver Ranch—now you hear me!"

"A steam wagon over these trails!" grunted the storekeeper. "Waal!"

"And wait till Old Bill sees a bunch of his

steers go up in the air when they sets eyes on the choo-choo wagon," chuckled Bud. "That'll about finish the automobile business, I bet yuh!"

"Come on, Bud!" shouted his mate, already astride his pony.

The two cowboys were off and lashing their ponies to a sharp run in half a minute. Scarcely had they disappeared behind a grove of scrub trees on the wind-swept ridge beyond the store when the honk of an automobile horn startled the slow-motioned storekeeper out of his chair.

A balloon of dust appeared far down the trail. Out of this there shot the long hood of a heavy touring car, which came chugging up the rise making almost as much noise as a steam roller. Lem Dickson shuffled to the door of the store and stuck his head within.

"Sally!" he bawled. "Sally!"

"Yes, Paw," replied a sweet, if rather shrill, voice from the open stairway that led to the upper chamber of the store-building.

"Here comes somebody I reckon you'll wanter see," bawled the old man.

There was a light step on the stair; but it halted on the last tread and a lithe, red-haired, peachy compexioned girl looked into the big room.

"Well, now, Paw," she said, sharply. "You ain't got me down yere for that bashful Ike Stedman, have you? For if he's come prognosticat-

ing around yere again I declare I'll bounce a bucket off his head. He's the biggest gump!"

"Come on yere, gal!" snapped her father. "I ain't said nothin' about Ike. This yere's Bill Hicks an' all his crowd comin' up from Bullhide in a blamed ol' steam waggin."

Sally ran out through the store and reached the piazza just as the snorting automobile came near and slowed down. A lithe, handsome, dark girl was at the wheel; beside her was a very pretty, plump girl with rosy cheeks and the brightest eyes imaginable; the third person crowded into the front seat was a youth who looked so much like the girl who was running the machine that they might have changed clothes and nobody would have been the wiser—save that Tom Cameron's hair was short and his twin sister, Helen's, was long and curly. The girl between the twins was Ruth Fielding.

In the big tonneau of the car was a great, tall, bony man with an enormous "walrus" mustache and a very red face; beside him sat a rather freckled girl with snapping black eyes, who wore very splendid clothes as though she was not used to them. With this couple were a big, blond boy and three girls—one of them so stout that she crowded her companions on the seat into their individual corners, and packed them in there somewhat after the nature of sardines in a can.

"Hello, Sally!" cried the girl in the very fine garments, stretching her hand out to greet the storekeeper's daughter as the automobile came to a stop.

"Hi, Lem!" bawled the man with the huge mustache. "Is Silver Ranch on the map yet, or have them punchers o' mine torn the face of Nater all to shreds an' only left me some o' the pieces?"

"I dunno 'bout that, Bill," drawled the fat storekeeper, shuffling down the steps in his list slippers, and finally reached and shaking the hand of Mr. William Hicks, owner of Silver Ranch. "But when some of your cows set their eyes on this contraption they're goin' to kick holes in the air—an' that's sartain!"

"The cows will have to get used to seeing this automobile, Lem Dickson," snapped the ranchman's niece, who had been speaking with Sally. "For uncle's bought it and it beats riding a cayuse, I tell you!"

"By gollies!" grunted Bill Hicks, "it bucks wuss'n any critter I ever was astride of." But he spoke softly, and nobody but the storekeeper noticed what he said.

"Mean to say you've bought this old chuckwaggin from Doosenberry?" demanded the storekeeper.

"Uh-huh," nodded Mr. Hicks.

"Wal, you're gittin' foolish-like in your old age, Bill," declared his friend.

"No I ain't; I'm gittin' wise," retorted the ranchman, with a wide grin.

"How's that?"

"I'm l'arnin' how to git along with Jane Ann," declared Mr. Hicks, with a delighted chortle, and pinching the freckled girl beside him.

"Ouch!" exclaimed his niece. "What's the matter, Uncle Bill?"

"He says he's bought this contraption to please you, Jane Ann," said the storekeeper. "But what'll Old Trouble-Maker do when he sees it —heh?"

"Gee!" ejaculated the ranchman. "I never thought o' that steer."

"I reckon Old Trouble-Maker will have to stand for it," scoffed the ranchman's niece, tossing her head. "Now, Sally, you ride out and see us. These girls from down East are all right. And we're going to have heaps of fun at Silver Ranch after this."

Helen Cameron touched a lever and the big car shot ahead again.

"She's a mighty white girl, that Sally Dickson," declared Jane Ann Hicks (who hated her name and preferred to be called "Nita").

"She's taught school here at the Crossing for one term, too. And she's sweet in spite of her peppery temper——"

"What could you expect?" demanded the stout girl, smiling all over her face as she looked back at the red-haired girl at the store. "She has a more crimson topknot than the Fox here——"

There came a sudden scream from the front seat of the automobile. The car, under Helen Cameron's skillful manipulation, had turned the bend in the trail and the chapparel instantly hid the store and the houses at the Crossing. Right ahead of them was a rolling prairie, several miles in extent. And up the rise toward the trail was coming, in much dust, a bunch of cattle, with two or three punchers riding behind and urging the herd to better pasture.

"Oh! see all those steers," cried Ruth Fielding. "Do you own *all* of them, Mr. Hicks?"

"I reckon they got my brand on 'em, Miss," replied the ranchman. "But that's only a leetle bunch—can't be more'n five hundred—coming up yere. I reckon, Miss Helen, that we'd better pull up some yere. If them cows sees us——"

"See there! see there!" cried the stout girl in the back seat.

As she spoke in such excitement, Helen switched off the power and braked the car. Out of the chapparel burst, with a frantic bellow, a huge

black and white steer—wide horned, ferocious of aspect—quite evidently "on the rampage." The noise of the passing car had brought him out of concealment. He plunged into the trail not ten yards behind the slowing car.

"Goodness me!" shouted the big boy who sat beside Bill Hicks and his niece. "What kind of a beast is that? It's almost as big as an elephant!"

"Oh!" cried the girl called "The Fox." "That surely isn't the kind of cattle you have here, is it? He looks more like a buffalo. See! he's coming after us!"

The black and white steer *did* look as savage as any old buffalo bull and, emitting a bellow, shook his head at the automobile and began to cast the dust up along his flanks with his sharp hoofs. He was indeed of a terrifying appearance.

"It's Old Trouble-Maker!" cried Jane Ann Hicks.

"He looks just as though his name fitted him," said Tom Cameron, who had sprung up to look back at the steer.

At that moment the steer lowered his head and charged for the auto. The girls shrieked, and Tom cried:

"Go ahead, Nell! let's leave that beast behind."

Before his sister could put on speed again,

however, the big boy, who was Bob Steele, sang out:

"If you go on you'll stampede that herd of cattle—won't she, Mr. Hicks? Why, we're between two fires, that's what we are!"

"And they're both going to be hot," groaned Tom. "Why, that Old Trouble-Maker will climb right into this car in half a minute!"

CHAPTER II

BASHFUL IKE

THE situation in the big automobile was quite as serious as Tom and Bob believed, and there was very good reason for the girls to express their fright in a chorus of screams. But Ruth Fielding, and her chum, Helen, on the front seat, controlled themselves better than the other Eastern girls; Jane Ann Hicks never said a word, but her uncle looked quite as startled as his guests.

"I am sartainly graveled!" muttered the ranchman, staring all around for some means of saving the party from disaster. "Hi gollies! if I only had a leetle old rope now——"

But he had no lariat, and roping a mad steer from an automobile would certainly have been a new experience for Bill Hicks. He had brought the party of young folk out to Montana just to give his niece pleasure, and having got Ruth Fielding and her friends here, he did not want to spoil their visit by any bad accident. These young folk had been what Bill Hicks called "mighty clever" to his Jane Ann when she had been cast-away in the East, and he had promised their

friends to look out for them all and send them home in time for school in the Fall with the proper complement of legs and arms, and otherwise whole as to their physical being.

Ruth Fielding, after the death of her parents when she was quite a young girl, had left Darrowtown and all her old friends and home associations, to live with her mother's uncle, at the Red Mill, on the Lumano River, near Cheslow in York State. Her coming to Uncle Jabez Potter's, and her early adventures about the mill, were related in the first volume of this series, entitled "Ruth Fielding of the Red Mill; Or, Jasper Parloe's Secret."

Ruth had found Uncle Jabez very hard to get along with, for he was a miser and his kinder nature had been crusted over by years of hoarding and selfishness; but through a happy turn of circumstances Ruth was enabled to get at the heart of her crotchety old uncle, and when Ruth's dearest friend, Helen Cameron, planned to go to boarding school, Uncle Jabez was won over to the scheme of sending the girl with her. The fun and work of that first term at school is related in the second volume of the series, entitled "Ruth Fielding at Briarwood Hall; Or, Solving the Campus Mystery."

For the mid-winter vacation Ruth accompanied Helen and other school friends to Mr. Cameron's

hunting camp, up toward the Canadian line. In "Ruth Fielding at Snow Camp; Or, Lost in the Backwoods," the girls and some of their boy friends experience many adventures and endure some hardship and peril while lost in the snow-shrouded forest.

One of Ruth's chums, Jennie Stone, otherwise known as "Heavy," invited her to Lighthouse Point, with a party of young people, for part of the summer vacation; and although Uncle Jabez was in much trouble over his investment in the Tintacker Mine, which appeared to be a swindle, the old miller had allowed Ruth to accompany her friends to the seashore because he had already promised her the outing. In "Ruth Fielding at Lighthouse Point; Or, Nita, the Girl Castaway," is narrated all the fun and delightful experiences the girl of the Red Mill and her friends had at the seaside; including the saving of a girl from the wreck of a lumber schooner, a miss who afterward proved to be Jane Ann Hicks, the niece of a very wealthy Montana ranch owner. The girl had run away from the ranch and from her guardian and calls herself Nita, "because the girl in the paper-covered novel was called Nita."

That was just the sort of a romantic, foolish girl Jane Ann Hicks was; but she learned a few things and was glad to see her old uncle, rough as he was, when he came hunting for her. And Mr.

Bill Hicks had learned a few things, too. He had never seen people spend money before he came East, and he had not understood Jane Ann's longing for the delicate and beautiful things in life. He saw, too, that a girl could not be properly brought up on a cattle ranch, with nothing but cow punchers and Indians and Mexican women about, and Mr. Hicks had determined to give his niece "a right-down good time," as he expressed it.

It was to give Jane Ann pleasure, and because of the kindness of Ruth and her friends to his niece, that Mr. Bill Hicks had arranged this trip West for the entire party, on a visit to Silver Ranch. But the old gentleman did not want their introduction to the ranch to be a tragedy. And with the herd of half-wild cattle ahead, and Old Trouble-Maker thundering along the trail behind the motor car, it did look as though the introduction of the visitors to the ranch was bound to be a strenuous one.

"Do go ahead, Helen!" cried Madge Steele, Bob's elder sister, from the back seat of the tonneau. "Why, that beast may climb right in here!"

Helen started the car again; but at that her brother and Ruth cried out in chorus:

"Don't run us into the herd, Helen!"

"What under the sun shall I *do?*" cried Miss

Cameron. "I can't please you all, that's sure."

"Oh, see that beast!" shrieked The Fox, who was likewise on the back seat. "I want to get out!"

"Then the brute will catch you, sure," said Bob Steele.

"Sit still!" commanded Mr. Hicks. "And stop the car, Miss! Better to be bunted by Old Trouble-Maker than set that whole bunch off on a stampede."

"Mercy me!" cried Mary Cox. "I should think it would be better to frighten those cows in front than to be horned to death by this big beast from the rear."

"Sit still," said Jane Ann, grimly. "We won't likely be hurt by either."

Old Trouble-Maker did look awfully savage. Bellowing with rage, he thundered along after the car. Helen had again brought the automobile to a stop, this time at Bill Hicks' command. The next moment the girls screamed in chorus, for the car jarred all over.

Crash went a rear lamp. About half a yard of paint and varnish was scraped off, and the car itself was actually driven forward, despite the brake being set, by the sheer weight of the steer.

"If we could git the old cart turned around and headed the other way!" groaned the ranchman.

"I believe I can turn it, Mr. Hicks," cried Helen, excitedly.

But just then the steer, that had fallen back a few yards, charged again. "Bang!" It sounded like the exploding of a small cannon. Old Trouble-Maker had punctured a rear tire, and the car slumped down on that side. Helen couldn't start it now, for the trail was too rough to travel with a flattened tire.

The black and white steer, with another furious bellow, wheeled around the back of the car and then came full tilt for the side. Heavy screamed at the top of her voice:

"Oh, take me home! I never *did* want to go to a dairy farm. *I just abominate cows!*"

But the crowd could not laugh. Huddled together in the tonneau, it looked as though Old Trouble-Maker would certainly muss them up a whole lot! Jane Ann and her uncle hopped out on the other side and called the others to follow. At that moment, with a whoop and a drumming of hoofs, a calico cow pony came racing along the trail toward the stalled car. On the back of this flying pony was a lanky, dust-covered cowboy, swinging a lariat in approved fashion.

"Hold steady, boss!" yelled this apparition, and then let the coils of the rope whistle through the air. The hair line uncoiled like a writhing serpent and dropped over the wide-spread horns

of Old Trouble-Maker. Then the calico pony came to an abrupt halt, sliding along the ground with all four feet braced.

"Zip!" the noose tightened and the steer brought up with a suddenness that threatened to dislocate his neck. Down the beast fell, roaring a different tune. Old Trouble-Maker almost turned a somersault, while Jane Ann, dancing in delight, caught off her very modern and high-priced hat and swung it in the air.

"Hurrah for Bashful Ike!" she shouted. "He's the best little old boy with the rope that ever worked for the Silver outfit. Hurrah!"

CHAPTER III

IN WHICH THINGS HAPPEN

THE cow puncher who had rescued them was a fine looking, bronzed fellow, with heavy sheepskin chaps on his legs, a shirt open at the throat, his sleeves rolled up displaying muscular arms, and twinkling eyes under the flapping brim of his great hat. While he "snubbed" the big steer to his knees again as the bellowing creature tried to rise, he looked down with a broad smile upon the sparkling face of the Western girl.

"Why, bless yo' heart, honey," he said, in a soft, Southern droll, "if you want me to, I'll jest natwcher'ly cinch my saddle on Old Trouble-Maker an' ride him home for yo'. It certainly is a cure for sore eyes to see you again."

"And I'm glad to see you, Ike. And these are all my friends. I'll introduce you and the boys to them proper at the ranch," cried the Western girl.

"Git that bellowin' critter away from yere, Ike," commanded Mr. Hicks. "I 'low the next bunch that goes to the railroad will include that black and white abomination."

"Jest so, Boss," drawled his foreman. "I been figurin' Old Trouble-Maker better be in the can than on the hoof. He's made a plumb nuisance of himself. Yo' goin' on, Boss? Bud and Jimsey's got that bunch out o' the way of your smoke-waggin."

"We've got to shift tires, Mr. Hicks," said Tom Cameron, who, with his chum, Bob Steele, was already jacking up the rear axle. "That steer ripped a long hole in this tire something awful."

Bashful Ike—who didn't seem at all bashful when it came to handling the big black and white steer—suddenly let that bellowing beast get upon his four feet. Then he swooped down upon the steer, gathering up the coils of his rope as he rode, twitched the noose off the wide horns, and leaning quickly from his saddle grabbed the "brush" of the steer's tail and gave that appendage a mighty twist.

Bellowing again, but for an entirely different reason, the steer started off after the bunch of cattle now disappearing in the dust-cloud, and the foreman spurred his calico pony after Old Trouble-Maker, yelling at the top of his voice at every jump of his pony:

"Ye-ow! ye-ow! ye-ow!"

"I declare I'm glad to see those cattle out of the way," said Helen Cameron, with a sigh.

"I believe you," returned Ruth, who was still beside her on the front seat. "I just didn't realize before that cattle on the range are a whole lot different from a herd of cows in an eastern pasture."

Tom and Bob got the new tire in place and pumped up, and then the automobile started again for the ranch house. Jane Ann was quite excited over her home-coming; anybody could see that with half an eye. She clung to her uncle's hand and looked at him now and again as though to assure the old fellow that she really was glad to be home.

And Bill Hicks himself began to "fill into the picture" now that he was back in Montana. The young folks had seen many men like him since leaving Denver.

"Why, he's just an old dear!" whispered Ruth to Helen, as the latter steered the car over the rough trail. "And just as kind and considerate as he can be. It's natural chivalry these Western men show to women, isn't it?"

"He's nice," agreed Helen. "But he never ought to have named his niece 'Jane Ann.' That was a mean trick to play on a defenseless baby."

"He's going to make it up to her now," chuckled Tom, who heard this, being on the front seat with the two chums. "I know the 'pinanner' has gone on ahead, as he promised Nita.

And carpets and curtains, too. I reckon this ranch we're coming to is going to 'blossom like the rose.'"

When they came in sight of Silver Ranch, just before evening, the guests from the East were bound to express their appreciation of the beauty of its surroundings. It was a low, broad verandahed house, covering a good deal of ground, with cookhouses and other outbuildings in the rear, and a big corral for the stock, and bunkhouses for the men. It lay in a beautiful little valley—a "coulie," Jane Ann, or Nita, called it—with green, sloping sides to the saucer-like depression, and a pretty, winding stream breaking out of the hollow at one side.

"I should think it would be damp down there," said Madge Steele, to the ranchman. "Why didn't you build your house on a knoll?"

"Them sidehills sort o' break the winds, Miss," explained Mr. Hicks. "We sometimes git some wind out yere—yes, ma'am! You'd be surprised."

They rode down to the big house and found a wide-smiling Mexican woman waiting for them on the porch. Jane Ann greeted her as "Maria" and Hicks sent her back to the kitchen to hurry supper. But everybody about the place, even Maria's husband, the "horse wrangler," a sleek looking Mexican with rings in his ears and a

broken nose, found a chance to welcome the returned runaway.

"My! it's great to be a female prodigal, isn't it?" demanded Heavy, poking Jane Ann with her forefinger. "Aren't you glad you ran away East?"

The Western girl took it good-naturedly. "I'm glad I came back, anyway," she acknowledged. "And I'm awfully glad Ruth and Helen and you-all could come with me."

"Well, we're here, and I'm delighted," cried Helen Cameron. "But I didn't really expect either Ruth or Mary Cox would come. Mary's got such trouble at home; and Ruth's uncle is just as cross as he can be."

Ruth heard that and shook her head, for all the girls were sitting on the wide veranda of the ranchhouse after removing the traces of travel and getting into the comfortable "hack-about" frocks that Jane Ann had advised them to bring with them.

"Uncle Jabez is in great trouble, sure," Ruth said. "Losing money—and a whole lot of money, too, as he has—is a serious matter. Uncle Jabez could lose lots of things better than he can money, for he loves money so!"

"My gracious, Ruth," exclaimed Helen, with a sniff, "you'd find an excuse for a dog's running

mad, I do believe! You are bound to see the best side of anybody."

"What you say isn't very clear," laughed her chum, good-humoredly; "but I guess I know what you mean, and thank you for the compliment. I only hope that uncle's investment in the Tintacker Mine will come out all right in the end."

Mary Cox, "The Fox," sat next to Ruth, and at this she turned to listen to the chums. Her sharp eyes sparkled and her face suddenly grew pale, as Ruth went on:

"I expect Uncle Jabez allowed me to come out here partly because that mine he invested in is supposed to be somewhere in this district."

"Oh!" said Helen. "A real mine?"

"That is what is puzzling Uncle Jabez, as I understand it," said Ruth soberly. "He isn't sure whether it is a *real* mine, or not. You see, he is very close mouthed, as well as close in money matters. He never said much to me about it. But old Aunt Alvirah told me all she knew.

"You see, that young man came to the mill as an agent for a vacuum cleaner, and he talked Uncle Jabez into buying one for Aunt Alvirah. Now, you must know he was pretty smart to talk money right out of Uncle's pocket for any such thing as that," and Ruth laughed; but she became grave in a moment, and continued:

"Not that he isn't as kind as he knows how to be to Aunt Alvirah; but the fact that the young man made his sale so quickly gave Uncle Jabez a very good opinion of his ability. So they got to talking, and the young man told uncle about the Tintacker Mine."

"Gold or silver?" asked Helen.

"Silver. The young fellow was very enthusiastic. He knew something about mines, and he had been out here to see this one. It had been the only legacy, so he said, that his father had left his family. He was the oldest, and the only boy, and his mother and the girls depended upon him. Their circumstances were cramped, and if he could not work this Tintacker Mine he did not know how he should support the family. There was money needed to develop the mine and —I am not sure—but I believe there was some other man had a share in it and must be bought out. At least, uncle furnished a large sum of money."

"And then?" demanded Helen Cameron.

"Why, then the young man came out this way. Aunt Alvirah said that Uncle Jabez got one letter from Denver and another from a place called Butte, Montana. Then nothing more came. Uncle's letters have been unanswered. That's ever since some time last winter. You see, uncle hates to spend more money, I suppose. He maybe doesn't know how to have the mine

searched for. But he told me that the young man said something about going to Bullhide, and I am going to try to find out if anybody knows anything about the Tintacker Mine the first time we drive over to town."

All this time Mary Cox had been deeply interested in what Ruth said. It was not often that The Fox paid much attention to Ruth Fielding, for she held a grudge against the girl of the Red Mill, and had, on several occasions, been very mean to Ruth. On the other hand, Ruth had twice aided in saving The Fox from drowning, and had the latter not been a very mean-spirited girl she would have been grateful to Ruth.

About the time that Ruth had completed her story of the Tintacker Mine and the utter disappearance of the young man who had interested her Uncle Jabez in that mysterious silver horde, Jane Ann called them all to supper. A long, low-ceiled, cool apartment was the dining-room at Silver Ranch. Through a long gallery the Mexican woman shuffled in with the hot viands from the kitchen. Two little dark-skinned boys helped her; they were Maria's children.

At supper Mr. Hicks took the head of the long table and Jane Ann did the honors at the other end. There were the Cameron twins, and Madge and Bob, and Jennie Stone and Mary Cox, beside Ruth Fielding herself. It was a merry party and

they sat long over the meal; before they arose from the table, indeed, much shuffling and low voices and laughter, together with tobacco smoke, announced the presence of some of the cowboys outside.

"The boys is up yere to hear that pinanner," said Mr. Hicks. "Jib's got it ready to slip out o' the box and we'll lift it into the other room—there's enough of us huskies to do it—and then you young folks can start something."

Jane Ann was delighted with the handsome upright instrument. She had picked it out herself in New York, and it had been shipped clear across the continet ahead of the private car that had brought the party to Bullhide. The jarring it had undergone had not improved its tone; but Helen sat down to it and played a pretty little medley that pleased the boys at the windows.

"Now, let Ruth sing," urged Jane Ann. "The boys like singing; give 'em something they can join in on the chorus like—that'll tickle 'em into fits!"

So Ruth sang such familiar songs as she could remember. And then Helen got her violin and Madge took her place at the piano, and they played for Ruth some of the more difficult pieces that the latter had learned at Briarwood—for Ruth Fielding possessed a very sweet and strong voice and had "made the Glee Club" during the

first half of her attendance at Briarwood Hall.

The boys applauded from the veranda. There was at least a dozen of the ranchman's employes at the home corral just then. Altogether Mr. Hicks paid wages to about sixty punchers and horse wranglers. They were coming and going between the home ranch and the ranges all the time.

The girls from the East gave the Silver Ranch cowboys a nice little concert, and then Jane Ann urged Jib Pottoway to come to the piano. The half-breed was on the veranda in the dusk, with the other fellows, but he needed urging.

"Here, you Jibbeway!" exclaimed Mr. Hicks. "You hike yourself in yere and tickle these ivories a whole lot. These young ladies ain't snakes; an' they won't bite ye."

The backward puncher was urged on by his mates, too, and finally he came in, stepping through the long window and sliding onto the piano bench that had been deserted by Madge. He was a tall, straight, big-boned young man, with dark, keen face, and the moment Tom Cameron saw him he seized Bob by the shoulder and whispered eagerly:

"I know that fellow! He played fullback with Carlisle when they met Cornell three years ago. Why, he's an educated man—he must be! And punching cattle out on this ranch!"

"Guess you forget that Theodore Roosevelt punched cattle for a while," chuckled Bob. "Listen to that fellow play, will you?"

And the Indian could—as Mr. Hicks remarked—"tickle the ivories." He played by ear, but he played well. Most of the tunes he knew were popular ditties and by and by he warmed the punchers up so that they began to hum their favorite melodies as Jib played them.

"Come on, there, Ike!" said the Indian, suddenly. "Give us that 'Prayer' you're so fond of. Come on, now, Ike!"

Bashful Ike evidently balked a little, but Jib played the accompaniment and the melody through, and finally the foreman of Silver Ranch broke in with a baritone roar and gave them "The Cowboy's Prayer." Ike possessed a mellow voice and the boys hummed in chorus in the dusk, and it all sounded fine until suddenly Jib Pottoway broke off with a sudden discordant crash on the piano keys.

"Hel-lo!" exclaimed Bill Hicks, who had lain back in his wicker lounging chair, with his big feet in wool socks on another chair, enjoying all the music. "What's happened the pinanner, Jib? You busted it? By jings! that cost me six hundred dollars at the Bullhide station."

But then his voice fell and there was silence both in the room and on the veranda. The sound

of galloping hoofs had shut the ranchman up. A pony was approaching on a dead run, and the next moment a long, loud "Ye-ow! ye-ow!" announced the rider's excitement as something extraordinary.

"Who's that, Ike?" cried Hicks, leaping from his chair.

"Scrub Weston," said the foreman as he clumped down the veranda steps.

Jib slipped through the window. Hicks followed him on the jump, and Jane Ann led the exodus of the visitors. There was plainly something of an exciting nature at hand. A pony flashed out of the darkness and slid to a perilous halt right at the steps.

"Hi, Boss!" yelled the cowboy who bestrode the pony. "Fire's sweeping up from Tintacker way! I bet it's that Bughouse Johnny the boys have chased two or three times. He's plumb loco, that feller is—oughtn't to be left at large. The whole chapparel down that a-way is blazin' and, if the wind rises, more'n ha'f of your grazin'll be swept away."

CHAPTER IV

THE FIRE FIGHT

THE guests had followed Mr. Hicks and Jib out of the long window and had heard the cow puncher's declaration. There was no light in the sky as far as the girls could see—no light of a fire, at least—but there seemed to be a tang of smoke; perhaps the smoke clung to the sweating horse and its rider.

"You got it straight, Scrub Weston?" demanded Bill Hicks. "This ain't no burn you're givin' us?"

"Great piping Peter!" yelled the cowboy on the trembling pony, "it'll be a burn all right if you fellows don't git busy. I left Number Three outfit fighting the fire the best they knew; we've had to let the cattle drift. I tell ye, Boss, there's more trouble brewin' than you kin shake a stick at."

"'Nuff said!" roared Hicks. "Get busy, Ike. You fellers saddle and light out with Scrub. Rope you another hawse out o' the corral, Scrub; you've blamed near killed that one."

"Oh! is it really a prairie fire?" asked Ruth, of Jane Ann. "Can't we see it?"

"You bet we will," declared the ranchman's niece. "Leave it to me. I'll get the horse-wrangler to hitch up a pair of ponies and we'll go over there. Wish you girls could ride."

"Helen rides," said Ruth, quickly.

"But not our kind of horses, I reckon," returned Jane Ann, as she started after the cowboys. "But Tom and Bob can have mounts. Come on, boys!"

"We'll get into trouble, like enough, if we go to this fire," objected Madge Steele.

"Come on!" said Heavy. "Don't let's show the white feather. These folks will think we haven't any pluck at all. Eastern girls can be just as courageous as Western girls, I believe."

But all the time Ruth was puzzling over something that the cowboy, Scrub Weston, had said when he gave warning of the fire. He had mentioned Tintacker and suggested that the fire had been set by somebody whom Ruth supposed the cowboys must think was crazy—otherwise she could not explain that expression, "Bughouse Johnny." These range riders were very rough of speech, but certainly their language was expressive!

This Tintacker Mine in which she was so deeply interested—for Uncle Jabez's sake—must be

very near the ranch. Ruth desired to go to the mine and learn if it was being worked; and she proposed to learn the whole history of the claim and look up the recording of it, as well. Of course, the young man who had gotten Uncle Jabez to invest in the silver mine had shown him deeds and the like; but these papers might have been forged. Ruth was determined to clear up the mystery of the Tintacker Mine before she left Silver Ranch for the East again.

Just now, however, she as well as the other guests of Jane Ann Hicks was excited by the fire on the range. They got jackets, and by the time all the girls were ready Maria's husband had a pair of half-wild ponies hitched to the buckboard. Bob elected to drive the ponies, and he and the five girls got aboard the vehicle while the restive ponies were held by the Mexican.

Tom and Jane Ann had each saddled a pony. Jane Ann rode astride like a boy, and she was up on a horse that seemed to be just as crazy as he could be. Her friends from the East feared all the time that Jane Ann would be thrown.

"Let 'em go, Jose!" commanded the Silver Ranch girl. "You keep right behind me, Mr. Steele—follow me and Mr. Tom. The trail ain't good, but I reckon you won't tip over your crowd if you're careful."

The girls on the buckboard screamed at that; but it was too late to expostulate—or back out

from going on the trip. The half-wild ponies were off and Bob had all he could do to hold them. Old Bill Hicks and his punchers had swept away into the starlit night some minutes before and were now out of both sight and hearing. As the party of young folk got out of the coulie, riding over the ridge, they saw a dull glow far down on the western horizon.

"The fire!" cried Ruth, pointing.

"That's what it is," responded Jane Ann, excitedly. "Come on!"

She raced ahead and Tom spurred his mount after her. Directly in their wake lurched the buckboard, with the excited Bob snapping the long-lashed whip over the ponies' backs. The vehicle pitched and jerked, and traveled sometimes on as few as two wheels; the girls were jounced about unmercifully, and The Fox and Helen squealed.

"I'm — be — ing — jolt — ed — to — a —jel —ly!" gasped Heavy. "I'll be—one sol—id bruise."

But Bob did not propose to be left behind by Jane Ann and Tom Cameron, and Madge showed her heartlessness by retorting on the stout girl:

"You'll be solid, all right, Jennie, never mind whether you are bruised or not. You know that you're no 'airy, fairy Lillian.'"

But the rate at which they were traveling was not conducive to conversation; and most of the

time the girls clung on and secretly hoped that Bob would not overturn the buckboard. The ponies seemed desirous of running away all the time.

The rosy glow along the skyline increased; and now flames leaped—yellow and scarlet—rising and falling, while the width of the streak of fire increased at both ends. Luckily there was scarcely any wind. But the fire certainly *was* spreading.

The ponies tore along under Bob's lash and Jane Ann and Tom did not leave them far behind. Over the rolling prairie they fled and so rapidly that Hicks and his aids from the ranch-house were not far in advance when the visitors came within unrestricted view of the flames.

Jane Ann halted and held up her hand to Bob to pull in the ponies when they topped a ridge which was the final barrier between them and the bottom where the fire burned. For several miles the dry grass, scrub, and groves of trees had been blackened by the fire. Light smoke clouds drifted away from the line of flame, which crackled sharply and advanced in a steady march toward the ridge on which the spectators were perched.

"My goodness me!" exclaimed Heavy. "You couldn't put *that* fire out by spilling a bucket of water on it, could you?"

The fire line was several miles long. The flames advanced slowly; but here and there

where it caught in a bunch of scrub, the tongues of fire mounted swiftly into the air for twenty feet, or more; and in these pillars of fire lurked much danger, for when a blast of wind chanced to swoop down on them, the flames jumped!

Toiling up the ridge, snorting and bellowing, tails in air and horns tossing, drifted a herd of several thousand cattle, about ready to stampede although the fire was not really chasing them. The danger lay in the fact that the flames had gained such headway, and had spread so widely, that the entire range might be burned over, leaving nothing for the cattle to eat.

The rose-light of the flames showed the spectators all this—the black smooch of the fire-scathed land behind the barrier of flame, the flitting figures on horseback at the foot of the ridge, and the herd of steers going over the rise toward the north—and the higher foothills.

"But what can they do?" gasped Ruth.

"They're back-firing," Tom said, holding in his pony. Tom was a good horseman and it was evident that Jane Ann was astonished at his riding. "But over yonder where they tried it, the flames jumped ahead through the long grass and drove the men into their saddles again."

"See what those fellows are doing!" gasped Madge, standing up. "They're roping those cattle—isn't that what you call it, *roping?*"

"And hog-tieing them," responded Jane Ann, eagerly. "That's Jib—and Bashful Ike. There! that's an axe Ike's got. He's going to slice up that steer."

"Oh, dear me! what for?" cried Helen.

"Why, the butchering act—right here and now?" demanded Heavy. "Aren't thinking of having a barbecue, are they?"

"You watch," returned the Western girl, greatly excited. "There! they've split that steer."

"I hope it's the big one that bunted the automobile," cried The Fox.

"Well, you can bet it ain't," snapped Jane Ann. "Old Trouble-Maker is going to yield us some fun at brandin' time—now you see."

But they were all too much interested just then in what was going on near at hand—and down at the fire line—to pay much attention to what Jane Ann said about Old Trouble-Maker. Bashful Ike and Jib Pottoway had split two steers "from stem to stern." Two other riders approached, and the girls recognized one of them as Old Bill himself.

"Tough luck, boys," grumbled the ranchman. "Them critters is worth five cents right yere on the hoof; but that fire's got to be smothered. Here, Jib! hitch my rope to t'tother end of your half of that critter."

In a minute the ranchman and the half-breed were racing down the slope, their ponies on the jump, the half of the steer jumping behind them. At the line of fire Hicks made his frightened horse leap the flames, they jerked the half of the steer over so that the cloven side came in contact with the flames, and then both men urged their ponies along the fire line, right in the midst of the smoke and heat, dragging the bleeding side of beef across the sputtering flames.

Ike and his mate started almost at once in the other direction, and both teams quenched the fire in good shape. Behind them other cowboys drew the halves of the second steer that had been divided, making sure of the quenching of the conflagration in the main; but there were still spots where the fire broke out again, and it was a couple of hours, and two more fat steers had been sacrificed, before it was safe to leave the fire line to the watchful care of only half a dozen, or so, of the range riders.

It had been a bitter fight while it lasted. Tom and Bob, and Jane Ann herself had joined in it—slapping out the immature fires where they had sprung up in the grass from sparks which flew from the greater fires. But the ridge had helped retard the blaze so that it could be controlled, and from the summit the girls from the East had enjoyed the spectacle.

Old Bill Hicks rode beside the buckboard when they started back for the ranchhouse, and was very angry over the setting of the fire. Cow punchers are the most careful people in the world regarding fire-setting in the open. If a cattleman lights his cigarette, or pipe, he not only pinches out the match between his finger and thumb, but, if he is afoot, he stamps the burned match into the earth when he drops it.

"That yere half-crazy tenderfoot oughter be put away somewhares, whar he won't do no more harm to nobody," growled the ranchman.

"Do you expect he set it, Uncle?" demanded Jane Ann.

"So Scrub says. He seen him camping in the cottonwoods along Larruper Crick this mawnin'. I reckon nobody but a confounded tenderfoot would have set a fire when it's dry like this, noways."

Here Ruth put in a question that she had longed to ask ever since the fire scare began: "Who *is* this strange man you call the tenderfoot?"

"Dunno, Miss Ruth," said the cattleman. "He's been hanging 'round yere a good bit since Spring. Or, he's been seen by my men a good bit. When they've spoke to him he's seemed sort of doped, or silly. They can't make him out. And he hangs around closest to Tintacker."

"You're interested in *that,* Ruth!" exclaimed Helen.

"What d'you know about Tintacker, Miss?" asked Old Bill, curiously.

"Tintacker is a silver mine, isn't it?" asked Ruth, in return.

"Tintacker used to be a right smart camp some years ago. Some likely silver claims was staked out 'round there. But they petered out, and ain't nobody raked over the old dumps, even, but some Chinamen, for ten year."

"But was there a particular mine called 'Tintacker'?" asked Ruth.

"Sure there was. First claim staked out. And it was a good one—for a while. But there ain't nothin' there now."

"You say this stranger hangs about there?" queried Tom, likewise interested.

"He won't for long if my boys find him arter this," growled Hicks. "They'll come purty close to running him out o' this neck o' woods—you hear me!"

This conversation made Ruth even more intent upon solving the mystery of the Tintacker Mine, and her desire to see this strange "tenderfoot" who hung about the old mining claims increased. But she said nothing more at that time regarding the matter.

CHAPTER V

"OLD TROUBLE-MAKER" TURNED LOOSE

AFTER getting to bed at midnight it could not be expected that the young people at Silver Ranch would be astir early on the morning following the fire scare. But Ruth, who was used to being up with the sun at the Red Mill—and sometimes a little before the orb of day—slipped out of the big room in which the six girls were domiciled when she heard the first stir about the corrals.

When she came out upon the veranda that encircled the ranchhouse, wreaths of mist hung knee-high in the coulie—mist which, as soon as the sun peeked over the hills, would be dissipated. The ponies were snorting and stamping at their breakfasts—great armfuls of alfalfa hay which the horse wranglers had pitched over the fence. Maria, the Mexican woman, came up from the cowshed with two brimming pails of milk, for the Silver Ranch boasted a few milch cows at the home place, and there had been sweet butter on the table at supper the night before—something which is usually very scarce on a cattle ranch.

Ruth ran down to the corral and saw, on the

bench outside the bunkhouse door, the row of buckets in which the boys had their morning plunge. The sleeping arrangements at Silver Ranch being rather primitive, Tom and Bob had elected to join the cowboys in the big bunkhouse, and they had risen as early as the punchers and made their own toilet in the buckets, too. The sheet-iron chimney of the chuckhouse kitchen was smoking, and frying bacon and potatoes flavored the keen air for yards around.

Bashful Ike, the foreman, met the Eastern girl at the corner of the corral fence. He was a pleasant, smiling man; but the blood rose to the very roots of his hair and he got into an immediate perspiration if a girl looked at him. When Ruth bade him good-morning Ike's cheeks began to flame and he grew instantly tongue-tied! Beyond nodding a greeting and making a funny noise in his throat he gave no notice that he was like other human beings and could talk. But Ruth had an idea in her mind and Bashful Ike could help her carry it through better than anybody else.

"Mr. Ike," she said, softly, "do you know about this man they say probably set the fire last night?"

Ike gulped down something that seemed to be choking him and mumbled that he supposed he had seen the fellow "about once."

"Do you think he is crazy, Mr. Ike?" asked the Eastern girl.

"I—I swanny! I couldn't be sure as to that, Miss," stammered the foreman of Silver Ranch. "The boys say he acts plumb locoed."

"'Locoed' means crazy?" she persisted.

"Why, Miss, clear 'way down south from us, 'long about the Mexican border, thar's a weed grows called loco, and if critters eats it, they say it crazies 'em—for a while, anyway. So, Miss," concluded Ike, stumbling less in his speech now, "if a man or a critter acts batty like, we say he's locoed."

"I understand. But if this man they suspect of setting the fire is crazy he isn't responsible for what he does, is he?"

"Well, Miss, mebbe not. But we can't have no onresponsible feller hangin' around yere scatterin' fire—no, sir!—ma'am, I mean," Ike hastily added, his face flaming up like an Italian sunset again.

"No; I suppose not. But I understand the man stays around that old camp at Tintacker, more than anywhere else?"

"That's so, I reckon," agreed Ike. "The boys don't see him often."

"Can't you make the boys just scare him into keeping off the range, instead of doing him real harm? They seemed very angry about the fire."

"I dunno, Miss. Old Bill's some hot under the collar himself—and he might well be. Last night's circus cost him a pretty penny."

"Did you ever see this man they say is crazy?" demanded Ruth.

"I told you I did oncet."

"What sort of a looking man is he?"

"He ain't no more'n a kid, Miss. That's it; he's jest a tenderfoot kid."

"A boy, you mean?" queried Ruth, anxiously.

"Not much older than that yere whitehead ye brought with yuh," said Ike, beginning to grin now that he had become a bit more familiar with the Eastern girl, and pointing at Bob Steele. "And he ain't no bigger than him."

"You wouldn't let your boys injure a young fellow like that, would you?" cried Ruth. "It wouldn't be right."

"I dunno how I'm goin' to stop 'em from mussin' him up a whole lot if they chances acrost him," said Ike, slowly. "He'd ought to be shut up, so he had."

"Granted. But he ought not to be abused. Another thing, Ike—I'll tell you a secret."

"Uh-huh?" grunted the surprised foreman.

"I want to see that young man awfully!" said Ruth. "I want to talk with him——"

"Sufferin' snipes!" gasped Ike, becoming so greatly interested that he forgot it was a girl he

was talking with. "What you wanter see that looney critter for?"

"Because I'm greatly interested in the Tintacker Mine, and they say this young fellow usually sticks to that locality," replied Ruth, smiling on the big cow puncher. "Don't you think I can learn to ride well enough to travel that far before we return to the East?"

"To ride to Tintacker, Miss?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Why, suah, Miss!" cried Ike, cordially. "I'll pick you-all out a nice pony what's well broke, and I bet you'll ride him lots farther than that. I'll rope him now—I know jest the sort of a hawse you'd oughter ride——"

"No; you go eat your breakfast with the other boys," laughed Ruth, preparing to go back to the ranchhouse. "Jane Ann says we're all to have ponies to ride and she maybe will be disappointed if I don't let her pick out mine for me," added Ruth, with her usual regard for the feelings of her mates. "But I am going to depend on you, Mr. Ike, to teach me to ride."

"And when you want to ride over to Tintacker tuh interview that yere maverick, yo' let me know, Miss," said Bashful Ike. "I'll see that yuh git thar with proper escort, and all that," and he grinned sheepishly.

Tom and Bob breakfasted with the punchers,

but after the regular meal at the ranchhouse the two boys hastened to join their girl friends. First they must all go to the corral and pick out their riding ponies. Helen, Madge and The Fox could ride fairly well; but Jane Ann had warned them that Eastern riding would not do on the ranch. Such a thing as a side-saddle was unknown, so the girls had all supplied themselves with divided skirts so that they could ride astride like the Western girl. Besides, a cow pony would not stand for the long skirt of a riding habit flapping along his flank.

Now, Ruth had ridden a few times on Helen's pony, and away back when she was a little girl she had ridden bareback on an old horse belonging to the blacksmith at Darrowtown. So she was not afraid to try the nervous little flea-bitten gray that Ike Stedman roped and saddled and bridled for her. Jane Ann declared it to be a favorite pony of her own, and although the little fellow did not want to stand while his saddle was being cinched, and stamped his cunning little feet on the ground a good bit, Ike assured the girl of the Red Mill that "Freckles," as they called him, was "one mighty gentle hawse!"

There was no use in the girls from the East showing fear; Ruth was too plucky to do that, anyway. She was not really afraid of the pony; but when she was in the saddle it did seem as

though Freckles danced more than was necessary.

These cow ponies never walk—unless they are dead tired; about Freckles' easiest motion was a canter that carried Ruth over the prairie so swiftly that her loosened hair flowed behind her in the wind, and for a time she could not speak—until she became adjusted to the pony's motion. But she liked riding astride much better than on a side-saddle, and she soon lost her fear. Ike had given her some good advice about the holding of her reins so that a sharp pull on Freckles' curb would instantly bring the pony down to a dead stop. The bashful one had screwed tiny spurs into the heels of her high boots and given her a light quirt, or whip.

The other girls—all but Heavy—were, as we have seen, more used to riding than the girl of the Red Mill; but with the stout girl the whole party had a great deal of fun. Of course, Jennie Stone expected to cause hilarity among her friends; she "poked fun" at herself all the time, so could not object if the others laughed.

"I'll never in this world be able to get into a saddle without a kitchen chair to step upon," Jennie groaned, as she saw the other girls choosing their ponies. "Mercy! if I got on that little Freckles, he'd squat right down—I know he would! You'll have to find something bigger than these rabbits for *me* to ride on."

At that she heard the girls giggling behind her and turned to face a great, droop-headed, long-eared roan mule, with hip bones that you could hang your hat on—a most forlorn looking bundle of bones that had evidently never recovered the climatic change from the river bottoms of Missouri to the uplands of Montana. Tom Cameron held the mule with a trace-chain around his neck and he offered the end of the chain to Heavy with a perfectly serious face.

"I believe you'd better saddle this chap, Jennie," said Tom. "You see how he's built—the framework is great. I know he can hold you up all right. Just look at how he's built."

"Looks like the steel framework of a sky-scraper," declared Heavy, solemnly. "Don't you suppose I might fall in between the ribs if I climbed up on that thing? I thought you were a better friend to me than that, Tom Cameron. You'd deliberately let me risk my life by being tangled up in that moth-eaten bag o' bones if it collapsed under me. No! I'll risk one of these rabbits. I'll have less distance to fall if I roll

But the little cow ponies were tougher than the stout girl supposed. Ike weighed in the neighborhood of a hundred and eighty pounds—solid bone and muscle—and the cayuse that he bestrode when at work was no bigger than Ruth's Freckles. They hoisted Heavy into the saddle, and Tom

offered to lash her there if she didn't feel perfectly secure.

"You needn't mind, Tommy," returned the stout girl. "If, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for me to disembark from this saddle, I'll probably want to get down quick. There's no use in hampering me. I take my life in my hand—with these reins—and—ugh! ugh! ugh!" she finished as, on her picking up the lines, her restive pony instantly broke into the liveliest kind of a trot.

But after all, Heavy succeeded in riding pretty well; while Ruth, after an hour, was not afraid to let her pony take a pretty swift gait with her. Jane Ann, however, showed remarkable skill and made the Eastern girls fairly envious. She had ridden, of course, ever since she was big enough to hold bridle reins, and there were few of the punchers who could handle a horse better than the ranchman's niece.

But the visitors from the East did not understand this fact fully until a few days later, when the first bunch of Spring calves and yearlings were driven into a not far distant corral to be branded. Branding is one of the big shows on a cattle ranch, and Ruth and her chums did not intend to miss the sight; besides, some of the boys had corraled Old Trouble-Maker near by and promised some fancy work with the big black and white steer.

"We'll show you some roping now," said Jane Ann, with enthusiasm. "Just cutting a little old cow out of that band in the corral and throwing it, ain't nothing. Wait till we turn Old Trouble-Maker loose."

The whole party rode over to the branding camp, and there was the black and white steer as wild as ever. While the branding was going on the big steer bellowed and stamped and tried to break the fence down. The smell of the burning flesh, and the bellowing of the calves and yearlings as their ears were slit, stirred the old fellow up.

"Something's due to happen when that feller gits turned out," declared Jib Pottoway. "You goin' to try to rope that contrary critter, Jane Ann?"

"It'll be a free-for-all race; Ike says so," cried Jane Ann. "You wait! You boys think you're so smart. I'll rope that steer myself—maybe."

The punchers laughed at this boast; but they all liked Jane Ann and had it been possible to make her boast come true they would have seen to it that she won. But Old Trouble-Maker, as Jib said, "wasn't a lady's cow."

It was agreed that only a free-for-all dash for the old fellow would do—and out on the open range, at that. Old Trouble-Maker was to be turned out of the corral, given a five-rod start, and then the bunch who wanted to have a tussle

with the steer would start for him. Just to make it interesting Old Bill Hicks had put up a twenty dollar gold piece, to be the property of the winner of the contest—that is, to the one who succeeded in throwing and "hog-tieing" Old Trouble-Maker.

It was along in the cool of the afternoon when the bars of the small corral were let down and the steer was prodded out into the open. The old fellow seemed to know that there was fun in store for him. At first he pawed the ground and seemed inclined to charge the line of punchers, and even shook his head at the group of mounted spectators, who were bunched farther back on the hillside. Bashful Ike stopped *that* idea, however, for, as master of ceremonies, he rode in suddenly and used his quirt on the big steer. With a bellow Old Trouble-Maker swung around and started for the sky-line. Ike trotted on behind him till the steer passed the five-rod mark. Then pulling the big pistol that swung at his hip the foreman shot a fusilade into the ground which started the steer off at a gallop, tail up and head down, and spurred the punchers into instant action, as well.

"Ye-yip!" yelled Bashful Ike. "Now let's see what you 'ombres air good for with a rope. Go to it!"

CHAPTER VI

THE ROPING CONTEST

WITH a chorus of "co-ees" and wild yells the cowboys of Silver Ranch dashed away on the race after the huge black and white steer. And Jane Ann, on her bay mustang, was right up with the leaders in the wild rush. It was indeed an inspiring sight, and the boys and girls from the East urged their own mounts on after the crowd with eagerness.

"See Nita ride! isn't she just wonderful?" cried Helen.

"I don't think there's anything wonderful about it," sneered The Fox, in her biting way. "She was almost *born* on horseback, you know. It's as natural to her as breathing."

"Bu—bu—but it shakes—you up—a good—bit more—than breath—breathing!" gasped Heavy, as her pony jounced her over the ground.

Tom and Bob had raced ahead after the cowboys, and Ruth was right behind them. She had learned to sit the saddle with ease now, and she was beginning to learn to swing a rope; Ike was

teaching her. Tom could really fling the lasso with some success; but of course he could not enter into this mad rush for a single steer.

A twenty dollar gold piece was not to be scorned; and the cowboys were earnest in their attempt to make that extra twenty over and above their monthly stipend. But Jane Ann Hicks worked for the fun of it, and because she desired to show her Eastern friends how she excelled in horsemanship. There were so many other things which her friends knew, in which she was deficient!

She was up with the leaders when they came within casting distance of the big steer. But the steer was wily; he dodged this way and that as they surrounded him, and finally one of the punchers got in an awkward position and Old Trouble-Maker made for him. The man couldn't pull his pony out of the way as the steer made a short turn, and the old fellow came head on against the pony's ribs. It was a terrific shock. It sounded like a man beating an empty rainwater barrel with a club!

The poor pony was fairly lifted off his feet and rolled over and over on the ground. Luckily his rider kicked himself free of the stirrups and escaped the terrible horns of Old Trouble-Maker. The steer thundered on, paying no further attention to overturned pony or rider, and it was Jib

Pottoway who first dropped a rope over the creature's horn.

But it was only over one horn and when the galloping steer was suddenly "snubbed" at the end of Jib's rope, what happened? Ordinarily Old Trouble-Maker should have gone down to his knees with the shock; but the Indian's pony stumbled just at that anxious moment, and instead of the steer being brought to his knees, the pony was jerked forward by Old Trouble-Maker's weight.

The cowboys uttered a chorus of dismal yells as Jib rose into the air—like a diver making a spring into the sea—and when he landed—well! it was fortunate that the noose slipped off the steer's horn and the pony did not roll over the Indian.

Two men bowled over and the odds all in favor of the black and white steer! The other cowboys set up a fearful chorus as Jib scrambled up, and Old Trouble-Maker thundered on across the plain, having been scarcely retarded by the Indian's attempt. Bellowing and blowing, the steer kept on, and for a minute nobody else got near enough to the beast to fling a rope.

Then one of the other boys who bestrode a remarkably fast little pony, got near enough (as he said afterward) to grab the steer by the tail and throw him! And it was too bad that he hadn't

tried that feat; for what he *did* do was to excitedly swing his lariat around his head and catch his nearest neighbor across the shoulders with the slack! This neighbor uttered a howl of rage and at once "ran amuck"—to the great hilarity of the onlookers. It was no fun for the fellow who had so awkwardly swung the rope, however; for his angry mate chased him half a mile straight across the plain before he bethought him, in his rage, that it was the steer, not his friend, that was to be flung and tied for the prize.

The others laughed so over this incident that the steer was like to get away. But one of the fellows, known to them all as "Jimsey" had been working cautiously on the outside of the bunch of excited horsemen all the time. It was evident to Ruth, who was watching the game very earnestly from the rear, that this Jimsey had determined to capture the prize and was showing more strategy than the others. He was determined to be the one to down Old Trouble-Maker, and as he saw one after the other of his mates fail, his own grin broadened.

Now, Ruth saw, he suddenly urged his pony in nearer the galloping steer. Standing suddenly in his stirrups, and swinging his lariat with a wide noose at the end, he dropped it at the moment when Old Trouble-Maker had just dodged another rope. The steer fairly ran into Jimsey's

noose. The puncher snubbed down on the rope instantly, and the steer, caught over the horns and with one foreleg in the noose, came to the hard plain like a ton of bricks falling.

"He's down! he's down!" shrieked Bob, vastly excited.

"Oh, the poor thing!" his sister observed. "That must have hurt him."

"Well, after the way that brute tried to crawl into the automobile, I wouldn't cry any if his neck was broken!" exclaimed Mary Cox, in sharp tones.

Jimsey's horse was well broken and he swung his weight at the end of the rope in such a way that the huge steer could not get on his feet again. Jimsey vaulted out of the saddle and ran to the floundering steer with an agility that delighted the spectators from the East. How they cheered him! And his mates, too, urged him on with delight. It looked as though Jimsey had "called the trick" and would tie the struggling beast and so fulfill the requirements of the contest.

As the agile puncher sought to lay hold of the steer's forefeet, however, Old Trouble-Maker flung his huge body around. The "yank" was too much for the pony and it was drawn forward perhaps a foot by the sheer weight of the big steer.

"Stand still, thar!" yelled Jimsey to the pony.

"Wait till I get this yere critter tied up in a true-lover's knot! Whoa, Emma!"

Again the big steer had jerked; but the pony braced his feet and swung backward. It was then the unexpected happened! The girth of Jimsey's saddle gave way, the taut rope pulling the saddle sideways. The pony naturally was startled and he jumped to one side. In an instant the big steer was nimbly on his feet, and flung Jimsey ten feet away! Bellowing with fear the brute tore off across the plain again, now with the wreck of Jimsey's saddle bounding over the ground behind him and whacking him across the rump at every other jump.

If anything was needed to make Old Trouble-Maker mad he had it now. The steer sped across the plain faster than he had ever run before, and in a temper to attack anything or anybody who chanced to cross his trail.

CHAPTER VII

JANE ANN TURNS THE TRICK

"Oh, Ruth! that man is hurt," cried Helen, as the chums rode as hard as they dared after the flying bunch of cattle punchers.

Jimsey lay on the ground, it was true; but when they came nearer they saw that he was shaking both fists in the air and spouting language that was the very reverse of elegant. Jimsey wasn't hurt; but he was awfully angry.

"Come on! come on, girls!" called Tom. "That old steer is running like a dog with a can tied to its tail! Did you ever see the beat of that?"

"And Nita is right in with the crowd. How they ride!" gasped Madge Steele. "She'll be killed!"

"I hope not," her brother shouted back. "But she's just about the pluckiest girl I ever heard of."

"She's swinging her rope now!" gasped Heavy. 'Do you suppose she intends to try and catch that steer?"

That was what Jane Ann Hicks seemed determined to do. She had ridden so that she was

ahead of the troop of other riders. Bashful Ike, the foreman, put spurs to his own mount and tried to catch the boss's niece. If anything happened to Jane Ann he knew that Old Bill would call him to account for it.

"Have a care there, Jinny!" he bawled "Look out that saddle don't give ye a crack."

The saddle bounded high in the air—sometimes higher than Jane Ann's head—and if she ran her mount in too close to the mad steer the saddle might knock her off her pony. Nor did she pay the least attention to Bashful Ike's advice. She was using the quirt on her mount and he was jumping ahead like a streak of light.

Jane Ann had coiled her rope again and it hung from her saddle. She had evidently formed a new plan of action since having the field to herself. The others—all but Ike—were now far behind.

"Have a care thar, Jinny!" called the foreman again. "He'll throw you!"

"You keep away, Ike!" returned the girl ,excitedly. "This is my chance. Don't you dare interfere. I'll show those boys I can beat them at their own game."

"Sufferin' snipes! You look out, Jinny! You'll be killed!"

"I won't if you don't interfere," she yelled back at him.

During this conversation both their mounts were on the keen jump. The saddle was bounding high over the plain as the steer still bellowed and ran. Jane Ann urged her pony as close alongside the steer as she dared, leaned sideways from her saddle, and made a sharp slash in the air with the hunting knife that had hung from her belt in its sheath. The keen blade severed Jimsey's best hair rope (there would be a postscript to Jimsey's remarks about that, later) and the saddle, just then bounding into the air, caromed from the steer's rump against Jane Ann's pony, and almost knocked it off its legs.

But the girl kept her seat and the pony gathered his feet under him again and started after the relieved steer. But she did not use her rope even then, and after returning her knife to its sheath she guided her pony close in to the steer's flank. Before that saddle had beaten him so about the body, Old Trouble-Maker might have made a swift turn and collided with the girl's mount; but he was thinking only of running away now—getting away from that mysterious thing that had been chasing and thumping him!

Ike, who cantered along just behind her (the rest of the crowd were many yards in the rear) suddenly let out a yell of fear. He saw that the girl was about to try, and he was scared. She leaned from her saddle and seized the stiff tail of

the steer at its base. The foreman drew his gun and spurred his horse forward.

"You little skeezicks!" he gasped. "If you break your neck your uncle will jest natcherly run me off'n this range!"

"Keep away, Ike!" panted the girl, letting the tail of the maddened steer run through her hand until she felt the bunch of hair—or brush—at the end.

Then she secured her grip. Digging her spurs into the pony's sides she made him increase his stride suddenly. He gained second by second on the wildly running steer and the girl leaned forward in her saddle, clinging with her left hand to the pommel, her face in the pony's tossing mane.

The next moment the tail was taut and the jerk was almost enough to dislocate her arm. But she hung on and the shock was greater to the big steer than to Jane Ann. The yank on his tail made him lose his stride and forced him to cross his legs. The next moment Old Trouble-Maker was on his head, from which he rolled over on his side, bellowing with fright.

It was a *vaquero* trick that Jane Ann had seen the men perform; yet it was a mercy that she, a slight girl, was not pulled out of her saddle and killed. But Jane Ann had done the trick nicely; and in a moment she was out of her saddle, and before Ike was beside her, had tied the steer's

feet, "fore and aft," with Jimsey's broken rope. Then, with one foot on the heaving side of the steer, she flung off her hat and shouted to the crowd that came tearing up:

"That double-eagle's mine! Got anything to say against it, boys?"

They cheered her to the echo, and after them came the party of Jane Ann's friends from the East to add their congratulations. But as Ruth and the others rode up Heavy of course had to meet with an accident. Hard luck always seemed to ride the stout girl like a nightmare!

The pony on which she rode became excited because of the crowd of kicking, squealing cow ponies, and Heavy's seat was not secure. When the pony began to cavort and plunge poor Heavy was shaken right over the pommel of her saddle. Her feet lost the stirrups and she began to scream.

"My — good — ness — me!" she stuttered. "Hold him—still! Stop! Ho—ho—ho——"

And then she slipped right over the pony's rump and would have fallen smack upon the ground had not Tom and Bob, who had both seen her peril, leaped out of their own saddles, and caught the stout girl as she lost her hold on the reins and gave up all hope.

The boys staggered under her weight, but managed to put her upright on her feet, while her

pony streaked it off across the plain, very much frightened by such a method of dismounting. It struck the whole crowd as being uproariously funny; but the good-natured and polite cowboys tried to smother their laughter.

"Don't mind me!" exclaimed the stout girl. "Have all the fun you want to. But I don't blame the pony for running away. I have been sitting all along his backbone, from his ears to the root of his tail, and I have certainly jounced my own backbone so loose that it rattles. I believe I'd better walk home."

It was plain that Jennie Stone would never take a high mark in horsemanship; but they caught her pony for her and boosted her on again, and later she rode back to the ranchhouse at an easy pace. But she declared that for the remainder of her stay at Silver Ranch she proposed to ride only in the automobile or in a carriage.

But Ruth was vastly enamored of this new play of pony riding. She had a retentive memory and kept in mind all that Bashful Ike told her about the management of her own Freckles. She was up early each morning and had a gallop over the prairie before her friends were out of their beds. And when Mr. Hicks stated one day that he had to ride to Bullhide on business, Ruth begged the privilege of riding with him, although the rest of the young folks did not care to take such a long trip in the hot sun.

"I've some business to attend to for my uncle," Ruth explained to the ranchman, as they started from the ranchhouse soon after breakfast. "And I want your advice."

"Sure, Ruthie," he said, "I'll advise ye if I can."

So she told him about Uncle Jabez's mixup with the Tintacker mining properties. Bill Hicks listened to this tale with a frowning brow.

"Bless your heart, Miss!" he ejaculated. "I believe you're chasin' a wild goose. I reckon your uncle's been stung. These wildcat mining properties are just the kind that greenhorn Easterners get roped into. I don't believe there's ten cents' worth of silver to the ton in all the Tintacker district. It played out years ago."

"Well, that may be," returned Ruth, with a sigh. "But I want to see the records and learn just how the Tintacker Mine itself stands on the books. I want to show Uncle Jabez that I honestly tried to do all that I could for him while I was here."

"That's all right, Ruthie. You shall see the records," declared Mr. Hicks. "I know a young lawyer in town that will help you, too; and it sha'n't cost you a cent. He's a friend of mine."

"Oh, thank you," cried Ruth, and rode along happily by the big cattleman's side.

They were not far from the house when Bashful Ike, who had been out on the range on some

errand, came whooping over the low hills to the North, evidently trying to attract their attention. Mr. Hicks growled:

"Now, what does that feller want? I got a list as long as my arm of things to tote back for the boys. Better have driv' a mule waggin, I reckon, to haul the truck home on."

But it was Ruth the foreman wished to speak to. He rode up, very red in the face, and stammering so that Bill Hicks demanded, with scorn:

"What's a-troubling you, Ike? You sputter like a leaky tea-kettle. Can't you out with what you've got to say to the leetle gal, an' let us ride on?"

"I—I was just a thinkin' that mebbe you—you could do a little errand for me, Miss," stammered Bashful Ike.

"Gladly, Mr. Stedman," returned Ruth, hiding her own amusement.

"It—it's sort of a tick-lish job," said the cowboy. "I—I want ye should buy a leetle present. It's—it's for a lady——"

Bill snorted. "You goin' to invest your plunder in more dew-dabs for Sally Dickson, Ike? Yah! she wouldn't look at you cross-eyed."

Bashful Ike's face flamed up redder than ever—if that was possible.

"I don't want her to look at me cross-eyed," he said. "She couldn't look cross-eyed. She's

the sweetest and purtiest gal on this range, and don't you forgit that, Mr. Hicks."

"Sho, now! don't git riled at me," grunted the older man. "No offense intended. But I hate to see you waste your time and money on a gal that don't give two pins for ye, Ike."

"I ain't axin' her to give two pins for me," said Ike, with a sort of groan. "I ain't up to the mark with her—I know that. But thar ain't no law keepin' me from spending my money as I please, is there?"

"I dunno," returned Bill Hicks. "Maybe there's one that'll cover the case and send a feller like you to the foolish factory. Sally Dickson won't have nothing to say to you."

"Never mind," said Ike, grimly. "You take this two dollar bill, Miss Ruthie—if you will. And you buy the nicest box o' candy yo' kin find in Bullhide. When you come back by Lem Dickson's, jest drop it there for Sally. Yo' needn't say who sent it," added the bashful cowboy, wistfully. "Jest—jest say one o' the boys told you to buy it for her. That's all, Miss. It won't be too much trouble?"

"Of course it won't, Mr. Stedman," declared Ruth, earnestly. "I'll gladly do your errand."

"Thank you, Miss," returned the foreman, and spurring his horse he rode rapidly away to escape further remarks from his boss.

CHAPTER VIII

WHAT WAS ON THE RECORDS

"Now, what can you do with a feller like that?" demanded Mr. Hicks, in disgust. "Poor old Ike has been shinning around Sally Dickson ever since Lem brought her home from school—from Denver. And she's a nice little gal enough, at that; but she ain't got no use for Ike and he ought to see it. Gals out here don't like fellers that ain't got sperit enough to say their soul's their own. And Ike's so bashful he fair hates hisself! You've noticed that."

"But he's just as kind and good-natured as he can be," declared Ruth, her pony cantering on beside the ranchman's bigger mount.

"That don't help a feller none with a gal like Sally," grunted Mr. Hicks. "She don't want a reg'lar *gump* hanging around her. Makes her the laffin' stock of the hull range—don't you see? Ike better git a move on, if he wants her. 'Tain't goin' to be no bashful 'ombre that gets Sally Dickson, let me tell ye! Sendin' her lollipops by messenger—bah! He wants ter ride up and hand that gal a ring—and a good one—if he expects to

ever git her into double harness. Now, you hear me!"

"Just the same," laughed Ruth, "I'm going to buy the nicest box of candy I can find, and she shall know who paid for it, too."

And she found time to purchase the box of candy while Mr. Hicks was attending to his own private business in Bullhide. The town boasted of several good stores as well as a fine hotel. Ruth went to the railroad station, however, where there was sure to be fresh candies from the East, and she bought the handsomest box she could find. Then she wrote Ike's name nicely on a card and had it tucked inside the wrapper, and the clerk tied the package up with gilt cord.

"I'll make that red-haired girl think that Ike knows a few things, after all, if he *is* less bold than the other boys," thought Ruth. "He's been real kind to me and maybe I can help him with Sally. If she knew beans she'd know that Ike was true blue!"

Mr. Hicks came along the street and found her soon after Ruth's errand was done and took her to the office of the young lawyer he had mentioned. This was Mr. Savage—a brisk, business-like man, who seemed to know at once just what the girl wished to discover.

"You come right over with me to the county records office and we'll look up the history of

those Tintacker Mines," he said. "Mr. Hicks knows a good deal about mining properties, and he can check my work as we go along."

So the three repaired to the county offices and the lawyer turned up the first records of the claims around Tintacker.

"There is only one mine called Tintacker," he explained. "The adjacent mines are Tintacker *claims*. The camp that sprang up there and flourished fifteen years ago, was called Tintacker, too. But for more than ten years the kiotes have held the fort over there for the most part—eh, Mr. Hicks?"

"And that crazy feller that's been around yere for some months," the ranchman said.

"What crazy fellow is that?" demanded Lawyer Savage, quickly.

"Why, thar's been a galoot around Tintacker ever since Spring opened. I dunno but he was thar in the winter——"

"Young man, or old?" interrupted Savage.

"Not much more'n a kid, my boys say."

"You've never seen him?"

"No. But I believe he set the grass afire the other day, and made us a heap of trouble along Larruper Crick," declared the ranchman.

The lawyer looked thoughtful. "There was a young fellow here twice to look up the Tintacker properties. He came to see me the first time—

that was more than a year ago. Said he had been left his father's share in the old Tintacker Mine and wanted to buy out the heirs of the other partner. I helped him get a statement of the record and the names of the other parties——"

"Oh, please, Mr. Savage, what was his name?"" asked Ruth, quickly.

"I don't know what his name really *was*," replied the lawyer, smiling. "He called himself John Cox—might have been just a name he took for the time being. There wasn't any Cox ever had an interest in the Tintacker as far as I can find. But he probably had his own reasons for keeping his name to himself. Then he came back in the winter. I saw him on the street here. That's all I know about him."

"Tenderfoot?" asked Hicks.

"Yes, and a nice spoken fellow. He made a personal inspection of the properties the first time he was here. That I know, for I found a guide for him, Ben Burgess. He stayed two weeks at the old camp, Ben said, and acted like he knew something about minerals."

Mr. Savage had found the proper books and he discovered almost at once that there had been an entry made since he had last looked up the records of Tintacker a year or more before.

"He must have found those other heirs and he's

"That fellow did it!" exclaimed the lawyer.

got possession of the entire Tintacker Mine holdings. Yes-sir! the records are as straight as a string. And the record was made last winter. That is what he came back here for. Now, young lady, what do you want to know about it all?"

"I want a copy, please, of the record just as it stands—the present ownership of the mine, I mean," said Ruth. "I want to send that to Uncle Jabez."

"It is all held now in the name of John Cox. The original owners were two men named Symplex and Burbridge. It is Burbridge's heirs this fellow seems to have bought up. Now, he told me his father died and left his share of the Tintacker to him. That means that 'Symplex' was this young Cox's father. One, or the other of them didn't use his right name—eh?" suggested the lawyer.

"But that doesn't invalidate the title. It's straight enough now. The Tintacker Mine—whether it is worth ten cents or ten thousand dollars—belongs to somebody known as John Cox—somebody who can produce the deeds. You say your uncle bought into the mine and took personal notes with the mine for security, Miss?"

"That is the way I understand it," Ruth replied.

"And it looks as though the young man used the money to buy out the other owners. That

seems straight enough. Your uncle's security is all clear as far as the title of the mine goes——"

"But according to what I know," broke in Mr. Hicks, "he might as well have a lien on a setting of hen's eggs as an interest in the Tintacker Mine."

"That's about it," admitted Mr. Savage. "I don't believe the mine is worth the money it cost the young fellow to have these records made."

"Well," said Ruth, with a sigh; "I'll pay you for making the copy, just the same; and I'll send it home to uncle. And, if you don't mind, Mr. Savage, I'll send him your name and address, too. Perhaps he may want you to make some move in the matter of the Tintacker property."

This was agreed upon, and the lawyer promised to have the papers ready to send East in two or three days. Then Mr. Hicks took Ruth to the hotel to dinner, and they started for the ranch again soon after that meal.

When they came in sight of the Crossing, Ruth saw that the little red painted schoolhouse was open. All the windows were flung wide and the door was ajar; and she could see Sally Dickson's brilliant hair, as well as other heads, flitting back and forth past the windows.

"Hi Jefers!" ejaculated Bill Hicks. "I reckon thar's goin' to be a dance at the schoolhouse Saturday night. I nigh forgot it. We'll all hafter

go over so that you folks from Down East kin see what a re'l Montany jamboree is like. The gals is fixin' up for it now, I reckon."

"I want to see Sally," said Ruth, smiling.

"Huh!" grunted Bill, with a glance at the big box of candy the Eastern girl held so carefully before her. "You kin see her all right. That red head of hers shines like a beacon in the night. And I'll speak to Lem."

Ruth rode her pony close to one of the open windows of the little schoolhouse. She could see that the benches and desks had been all moved out—probably stacked in a lean-to at the end of the house. The floor had been swept and mopped up and the girls were helping Sally trim the walls and certain pictures which hung thereon with festoons of colored paper. One girl was polishing the lamp chimneys, and another was filling and trimming the lamps themselves.

"Oh, hullo!" said the storekeeper's daughter, seeing Ruth at the window, and leaving her work to come across the room. "You're one of those young ladies stopping at Silver Ranch, aren't you?"

"No," said Ruth, smiling. "I'm one of the girls visiting Jane Ann. I hope you are going to invite us to your party here. We shall enjoy coming, I am sure."

"Guess you won't think much of our ball," re-

turned Sally Dickson. "We're plain folk. Don't do things like they do East."

"How do you know what sort of parties we have at home?" queried Ruth, laughing at her. "We're not city girls. We live in the country and get our fun where we can find it, too. And perhaps we can help you have a good time—if you'll let us."

"Well, I don't know," began Sally, yet beginning to smile, too; nobody could be *grouchy* and stare into Ruth Fielding's happy face for long.

"What do you do for music?"

"Well, one of the boys at Chatford's got a banjo and old Jim Casey plays the accordeon—when he's sober. But the last time the music failed us, and one of the boys tried to whistle the dances; but one feller that was mad with him kept showing him a lemon and it made his mouth twist up so that he couldn't keep his lips puckered nohow."

Ruth giggled at that, but said at once:

"One of my friends plays the piano real nicely; but of course it would be too much trouble to bring Jane Ann's piano away over here. However, my chum, Helen, plays the violin. She will bring it and help out on the music, I know. And we'd *all* be glad of an invitation."

"Why, sure! you come over," cried Sally, warming up to Ruth's advances. "I suppose a

bunch of the Silver outfit boys will be on hand. Some of 'em are real nice boys——"

"And that reminds me," said Ruth, advancing the package of candy. "One of the gentlemen working for Mr. Hicks asked me to hand you this, Miss Dickson. He was very particular that you should get it safely." She put the candy into the red-haired girl's hands. "And we certainly will be over—all of us—Saturday evening."

Before Sally could refuse Ike's present, or comment upon it at all, Ruth rode away from the schoolhouse.

CHAPTER IX

THE FOX IS RECKLESS

When Ruth arrived at Silver Ranch that afternoon she found that the ranchman's niece and the other girls had planned an outing for the following day into the hills West of the range over which Mr. Hicks' cattle fed. It was to be a picnic jaunt, the object being mainly to view the wonderful "natural bridge" in a small canon, some thirty miles from the ranch.

A sixty-mile drive within twenty-four hours seemed a big undertaking in the minds of the Eastern young folk; but Jane Ann said that the ponies and mules could stand it. It was probable, however, that none of the visitors could stand the ride in the saddle, so arrangements had been made for both buckboards to be used.

Tom and Bob were each to drive one of the vehicles. Jib Pottoway was to go as guide and general mentor of the party, and one of the little Mexican boys would drive the supply wagon, to which were hitched two trotting mules. The start would be made at three in the morning; therefore

the ranchhouse was quiet soon after dark that evening.

Maria had breakfast ready for them as soon as the girls and Bob and Tom appeared; and the wagon was laden with provisions, as well as a light tent and blankets. Tom and Bob had both brought their guns with them, for there might be a chance to use the weapons on this jaunt.

"There are plenty of kiotes in the hills," said Jane Ann. "And sometimes a gray wolf. The boys once in a while see cats about—in calving time, you know. But I reckon they're mighty scarce."

"Cats?" cried Heavy. "Do you shoot cats?"

"Pumas," explained Jane Ann. "They're some nasty when they're re'l hungry."

"Oh, I don't want to see any more of the wildcat tribe," Ruth cried. "I had my fill of them last winter at Snow Camp."

Tom of course was to drive the buckboard in which his twin and Ruth rode; but the chums certainly would not have chosen Mary Cox for the fourth member of the party. However, The Fox usually knew what she wanted herself, and got it, too! She liked Master Tom and wished to ride beside him; and the instant she learned which pair of ponies he was to drive, she hopped into the front seat of that buckboard.

"I'm going to sit with you, Tom," she said,

coolly. "I believe you've got the best ponies. And you can drive better than Bob, too."

Tom didn't look overjoyed, and Helen, seeing the expression of her twin's face, began to giggle. There was, however, no polite way of getting rid of The Fox.

In a few minutes they were off, Jib Pottoway heading the procession, and Ricardo, the Mexican, bringing up the rear with the mule cart.

"You keep a sharp eye on them younguns, Jib!" bawled Bill Hicks, coming to the door of the ranchhouse in his stocking feet and with his hair touseled from his early morning souse in the trough behind the house. "I'll hold you responsible if anything busts—now mind ye!"

"All right, Boss," returned the Indian stolidly. "I reckon nothin' won't bite 'em."

Driving off thirty miles into the wilderness was nothing in the opinion of these Westerners; but to the girls from Briarwood Hall, and their brothers, the trip promised all kinds of excitement. And they enjoyed every mile of the journey through the foothills. There was something new and strange (to the Easterners) to see almost every mile, and Jane Ann, or Jib, was right there to answer questions and explain the wonders.

At first they saw miles upon miles of range, over which fed the Silver Ranch herds. Heretofore Ruth and her friends had not realized the size of

the ranch itself and what it meant to own fifty thousand cattle.

"Why!" exclaimed Heavy, with some awe. "Your uncle, Nita, is richer than Job—and the Bible says he was the greatest of all the men of the East! He only owned seven thousand sheep and three thousand camels and a thousand oxen and five hundred she-asses. Why, I believe there are more creatures in that one herd yonder than poor old Job owned."

"I guess that was a pretty good herd for 'way down there in Arabia, and so long ago," returned Jane Ann. "But cattlemen have learned a lot since those times. I expect Uncle Bill has got more ponies than Job had mules."

"And the men who looked after Job's cattle were a whole lot different from those fellows," cried Helen, from the forward buckboard, pointing to a couple of well-mounted punchers spurring after a score of strays that had broken away from the main herd. "Dear me, how recklessly they ride!"

"But I guess that all cowboys have been reckless and brave," said Ruth, quickly. "Somehow, herding cattle on the open plains and hills seems to make for rugged character and courage. Think of King David, and lots of those Biblical characters. David was a cowboy, and went out and slew Goliah. And I expect any of these punchers

we see around here wouldn't be afraid of a giant," she concluded.

"Huh!" snapped The Fox, who usually found something sharp to say in comment upon Ruth's speeches, "I guess these cowboys aren't any better than the usual run of men. *I* think they're rather coarse and ugly. Look at this half Indian ahead of us."

"What do you mean—*him?*" exclaimed Tom Cameron, who was pretty well disgusted with The Fox and her sly and sneering ways. "Why, he's got a better education than most of the men you meet. He stood high at Carlisle, in his books as well as athletics. You wouldn't scoff at any other college-bred fellow—why at Jib?"

"Indian," said Mary Cox, with her nose in the air.

"His folks owned the country—the whole continent!" cried the excited Tom, "until white men drove them out. You'd consider an Englishman, or a German, or a Belgian, with his education, the equal of any American. And Jib's a true American at that."

"Well, I can't say that I ever could admire a savage," sniffed The Fox, tossing her head.

For the most part, however, the girls and their drivers had a very jolly time, and naturally there could not be much "bickering" even in the leading buckboard where The Fox rode, for Ruth was

there, and Ruth was not one of the bickering kind, Helen was inclined to think that her chum was altogether too "tame"; she would not "stand up for herself" enough, and when The Fox said cutting things Ruth usually ignored her schoolfellow's ill-nature.

Tom was not entirely happy with The Fox on the seat beside him. He had hoped Ruth would occupy that place. When Mary spoke to him perhaps the young fellow was a bit cold. At least, before they came to the canon, through which flowed Rolling River, Master Tom had somehow managed to offend The Fox and her eyes snapped and she held her lips grimly shut.

The trail became narrow here and it rose steeply, too. The roaring river tumbled over the rocks on the left hand, while on the right the sheer cliff rose higher and higher. And while the ponies climbed the rather steep ascent Jib Pottoway spurred his horse ahead to see if the path was all clear to the place where the canon became a veritable tunnel under the "natural bridge."

"Go slow, Tom Cameron!" shouted the ranchman's niece from the second carriage. "There are bad places when we get to the upper level—very narrow places. And the river is a hundred feet below us there."

"She's trying to scare us," snapped The Fox. "I never saw such people!"

"I guess it will be best to take care," grunted Tom. "She's been here before, remember."

"Pah! you're afraid!"

"Perhaps I am," returned Tom. "I'm not going to take any chances with these half wild ponies—and you girls in the wagon."

In a minute more they were at the top of the rise. Jib had disappeared around a distant turn in the path, which here was straight and level for fully a mile. The muffled roar of the river came up to them, and the abrupt cliff on the right cast its shadow clear across the canon. It was a rugged and gloomy place and Helen hid her eyes after glancing once down the steep descent to the river.

"Oh! drive on, Tommy!" she cried. "I don't want to look down there again. What a fearful drop it is! Hold the ponies tight, Tommy."

"Pshaw, you are making a great adieu about nothing," snapped Mary Cox.

"I'll have a care, Nell; don't you fear," assured her brother.

Ruth was as serious as her chum, and as she had a quick eye she noticed a strap hanging from the harness of one of the ponies and called Tom's attention to it.

"There's a strap unbuckled, Tom," she cried. "Do you see it hanging?"

"Good for you, Ruthie!" cried the boy, lean-

ing out of his seat to glimpse the strap. "Here, Mary! hold these reins, please."

He put the reins into the hands of The Fox and hopped out. She laughed and slapped them across the ponies' backs and the beasts reared and snorted.

"Have a care what you're doing, Mary Cox!" shrieked Helen.

"Whoa!" cried her brother, and leaped to seize the nearest pony by the bit. But the half wild animals jerked away from him, dashing across the narrow trail.

"Pull up! pull up!" shouted Tom.

"Don't let them run!" cried Jane Ann Hicks, standing up in the carriage behind.

But in that single moment of recklessness the ponies became unmanageable—at least, unmanageable for The Fox. She pulled the left rein to bring them back into the trail, and off the creatures dashed, at headlong speed, along the narrow way. On the right was the unscalable wall of rock; on the left was the awful drop to the roaring river!

CHAPTER X

RUTH SHOWS HER METTLE

SHOUTING after the runaway, and shrieking advice to The Fox, who still clung to the reins, was of no particular use, and Tom Cameron realized that as well as did Jane Ann. The boy from the East picked himself up and leaped upon the rear of the second buckboard as it passed him, and they tore on after the frightened ponies.

Mary Cox could not hold them. She was not a good horsewomen, in any case; and a moment after the ponies broke loose, she was just as frightened as ever she could be.

She did not drop the lines; that was because she did not think to do so. She was frozen with terror. The ponies plunged along the narrow trail, weaving the buckboard from side to side, and Mary was helpless to stop them. On the rear seat Helen and Ruth clung together in the first shock of fear; the threatening catastrophe, too, appalled them.

But only for the first few seconds was Ruth inactive. Behind the jouncing vehicle Tom was shouting to them to "pull 'em down!" Ruth

wrenched herself free from her chum's grasp and leaned forward over the seat-back.

"Give the reins to me!" she cried in Mary's ear, and seized the leathers just as they slipped from the hands of The Fox.

Ruth gripped them firmly and flung herself back into her own seat. Helen seized her with one hand and saved her from being thrown out of the pitching vehicle. And so, with her chum holding her into her seat, Ruth swung all her weight and force against the ponies' bits.

At first this seemed to have not the least effect upon the frightened animals. Ruth's slight weight exercised small pressure on those iron jaws. On and on they dashed, rocking the buckboard over the rough trail—and drawing each moment nearer to that perilous elbow in the canon!

Ruth realized the menacing danger of that turn in the trail from the moment the beasts first jumped. There was no parapet at the outer edge of the shelf—just the uneven, broken verge of the rock, with the awful drop to the roaring river below.

She remembered this in a flash, as the ponies tore on. There likewise passed through her mind a vision of the chum beside her, crushed and mangled at the bottom of the canon—and again, Helen's broken body being swept away in the

river! And The Fox—the girl who had so annoyed her—would likewise be killed unless she, Ruth Fielding, found some means of averting the catastrophe.

It was a fact that she did not think of her own danger. Mainly the runaway ponies held her attention. *She must stop them before they reached the fatal turn!*

Were the ponies giving way a little? Was it possible that her steady, desperate pulling on the curbs was having its effect? The pressure on their iron jaws must have been severe, and even a half-broken mustang pony is not entirely impervious to pain.

But the turn in the road was so near!

Snorting and plunging, the animals would—in another moment—reach the elbow. Either they must dash themselves headlong over the precipice, and the buckboard would follow, or, in swerving around the corner, the vehicle and its three passengers would be hurled over the brink.

And then something—an inspiration it must have been—shot athwart Ruth's brain. The thought could not have been the result of previous knowledge on her part, for the girl of the Red Mill was no horsewoman. Jane Ann Hicks might have naturally thought to try the feat; but it came to Ruth in a flash and without apparent reason.

She dropped the left hand rein, stood up to seize the right rein with a shorter grip, and then flung herself back once more. The force she brought to bear on the nigh pony by this action was too much for him. His head was pulled around, and in an instant he stumbled and came with a crash to the ground!

The pony's fall brought down his mate. The runaway was stopped just at the turn of the trail —and so suddenly that Mary Cox was all but flung headlong upon the struggling animals. Ruth and Helen *did* fall out of the carriage—but fortunately upon the inner side of the trail.

Even then the maddened, struggling ponies might have cast themselves—and the three girls likewise—over the brink had not help been at hand. At the turn appeared Jib Pottoway, his pony in a lather, recalled by the sound of the runaways' drumming hoofs. The Indian flung himself from the saddle and gripped the bridles of the fallen horses just in season. Bob, driving the second pair of ponies with a firm hand, brought them to a halt directly behind the wreck, and Tom and Jane Ann ran to Jib's assistance.

"What's the matter with these ponies?" demanded the Indian, sharply. "How'd they get in this shape? I thought you could drive a pair of hawses, boy?" he added, with scorn, looking at Tom.

"I got out to buckle a strap and they got away," said Tom, rather sheepishly.

"Don't you scold him, Jib!" commanded Jane Ann, vigorously. "He ain't to blame."

"Who is?"

"That girl yonder," snapped the ranchman's niece, pointing an accusing finger at Mary Cox. "I saw her start 'em on the run while Tom was on the ground."

"Never!" cried The Fox, almost in tears.

"You did," repeated Jane Ann.

"Anyway, I didn't think they'd start and run so. They're dangerous. It wasn't right for the men to give us such wild ponies. I'll speak to Mr. Hicks about it."

"You needn't fret," said Jane Ann, sternly. "I'll tell Uncle Bill all right, and I bet you don't get a chance to play such a trick again as long as you're at Silver Ranch——"

Ruth, who had scrambled up with Helen, now placed a restraining hand on the arm of the angry Western girl; but Jane Ann sputtered right out:

"No! I won't keep still, Ruth Fielding. If it hadn't been for you that Mary Cox would now be at the bottom of these rocks. And she'll never thank you for saving her life, and for keeping her from killing you and Helen. She doesn't know how to spell gratitude! Bah!"

"Hush up, Jinny," commanded Jib, easily.

"You've got all that off your mind now, and you ought to feel some better. The ponies don't seem to be hurt much. Some scraped, that's all. We can go on, I reckon. You ride my hawse, Mr. Cameron, and I'll sit in yere and drive. Won't trust these gals alone no more."

"I guess you could trust Ruth Fielding all right," cried the loyal Tom. "She did the trick —and showed how plucky she is in the bargain. Did you ever see anything better done than the way she threw that pony?"

Jane Ann ran to the girl of the Red Mill and flung her arms around her neck.

"You're just as brave as you can be, Ruthie!" she cried. "I don't know of anybody who is braver. If you'd been brought up right out here in the mountains you couldn't have done any better—could she, Jib?"

"Miss Fielding certainly showed good mettle," admitted the Indian, with one of his rare smiles. "And now we'll go on to the camping place. Don't let's have any more words about it, or your fun will all be spoiled. Where's Ricardo, with the camp stuff? I declare! that Greaser is five miles behind, I believe."

With which he clucked to the still nervous ponies and, Tom now in the lead, the procession started on in a much more leisurely style.

CHAPTER XI

AN URSINE HOLD-UP

THE party of young people were so excited by the adventure that they were scarcely in mind to appreciate the rugged beauty of the canon. The opposite wall was covered with verdure—hardy trees and shrubs found their rootage in the crevices between the rocks. Some beds of moss, far down where the spray from the river continually irrigated the thin soil, were spangled so thickly with starlike, white flowers that the patches looked like brocaded bedspreads.

Around the elbow in the trail—that sharp turn which had been the scene of the all but fatal accident—the driveway broadened. Far ahead (for the canon was here quite straight again) they could see the arching roof of rock, surmounted by the primeval forest, which formed the so-called natural bridge. The river tumbled out of the darkness of the tunnel, fretted to a foaming cascade by battling with the boulders which strewed its bed under the roof-rock. The water's surface gleamed ghostly in the shadow of the arch, and

before the opening the arc of a rainbow shone in the spray.

As the girls' excitement subsided, Ruth saw this scene far ahead and cried aloud in rapture:

"Look! Oh, just look! Isn't that beautiful?"

"The waterfall," agreed her chum, "or cascade, or whatever they call it, is just a picture, Ruthie!"

"Mighty pretty," said Tom, reining in the pony beside them.

"The cavern is so black and the water is so white—like milk," cried Madge from the second carriage. "What a contrast!"

"I tell you what it looks like," added Heavy, who sat beside her. "A great, big chocolate cream drop that's broken and the cream oozing out. M—m!"

They all laughed at the stout girl's figure of speech, for Jennie Stone's mind seemed always to linger upon good things to eat, and this comparison was quite characteristic.

"I'd be afraid to go down under that bridge," said Helen. "It's so dark there."

"But there's a path through the tunnel, Miss," said Jib, the Indian. "And there's another path by which you can climb out on the top of the bridge. But the trail for a waggin' stops right yonder, where we camp."

This spot was a sort of cove in the wall of the

canon—perhaps half an acre in extent. There was a pretty lawn with a spring of sweet water, the overflow of which trickled away to the edge of the precipice and dashed itself to spray on the rocks fifty feet below.

They had become used to the sullen roar of the river now and did not heed its voice. This was a delightful spot for camping and when Ricardo came up with the wagon, the boys and Jib quickly erected the tent, hobbled the ponies, and built a fire in the most approved campers' fashion.

Never had a picnic luncheon tasted so good to any of the party. The mountain air had put an edge on their appetites, and Heavy performed such feats of mastication that Helen declared she trembled for the result.

"Don't you trouble about me," said the stout girl. "You want to begin to worry over *my* health when I don't eat at all. And I can't see where I have got so far ahead of any of the rest of you in the punishment of this lunch."

But afterward, when the other girls proposed to climb the rocky path to the summit of the natural bridge, Heavy objected.

"It's injurious to take violent exercise after eating heavily," she said.

"I never knew the time when Heavy considered it safe to exercise," said The Fox, who had gradually recovered her usual manner since the run-

away. "The time between meals isn't long enough, in her opinion, to warrant anybody's working. Come on! let's leave her to slothful dreams."

"And blisters," added Heavy. "My shoes have hurt me for two days. I wouldn't climb over these rocks for a farm—with a pig on't! Go on—and perspire—and tell yourselves you're having a good time. I've a book here to read," declared the graceless and lazy stout girl.

"But aren't the boys going?" asked Ruth.

"They've started for the tunnel down there—with Jib," said Jane Ann, with a snap. "Huh! boys aren't no good, anyway."

"Your opinion may be correct; your grammar is terrible," scoffed Mary Cox.

"Never you mind about my grammar, Miss Smarty!" rejoined the Western girl, who really couldn't forget the peril into which The Fox had run her friends so recently. "If you girls are comin' along to the top of the bridge, come on. Let the boys go down there, if they want to. The rocks are slippery, and they'll get sopping wet."

"There isn't any danger, is there?" queried Helen, thinking of her brother.

"No, of course not," replied Jane Ann. "No more danger than there is up this way," and she led the way on the path that wound up the rocky heights.

The girls were dressed in corduroy skirts and strong, laced walking boots—a fitting costume for the climb. But had Jib been present at the camp perhaps he would not have allowed them to start without an escort. Ricardo had to remain at the camp. This was a wild country and not even Jane Ann carried any weapon, although when the ranchman's niece rode about the range alone she carried a gun—and she knew how to use the weapon, too.

But they could hear the shouts of the boys, rising above the thunder of the river, when they left the plateau and began to climb the heights, and danger of any kind did not enter the minds of the girls. It was like picnicking along the Lomano River, at home, only the scenery here was grander.

Ruth and Helen assumed the lead after a very few minutes; they were even better climbers than the Western girl. But the way was steep and rugged and it wasn't long before their chatter ceased and they saved their breath for the work in hand. Madge and Jane Ann came along after the chums quite pluckily; but The Fox began clamoring for rest before they had climbed half the distance to the top of the cliff.

"Oh, come on, Mary!" ejaculated Madge. "Don't be whining."

"I don't see anything in this," grumbled The

Fox. "It's no fun scrambling over these rocks. Ouch! Now I've torn my stocking."

"Aw, come on!" said Jane Ann. "You're a regular wet blanket, you are."

"There's no sense in working so hard for nothing," snapped The Fox.

"What did you start out for, Mary?" demanded Madge. "You might have remained at the camp with Heavy."

"And she had sense."

"It's too bad *you* haven't a little, then," observed Jane Ann, rudely.

Ruth and Helen, who really enjoyed the climb, looked down from the heights and beckoned their comrades on.

"Hurry up, Slow Pokes!" cried Ruth. "We shall certainly beat you to the top."

"And much good may that do you!" grumbled Mary Cox. "What a silly thing to do, anyway."

"I do wish you'd go back, if you want to, Mary," declared Madge, wearily.

"She's as cross as two sticks," ejaculated Jane Ann.

"Well, why shouldn't I be cross?" demanded The Fox, quite ready to quarrel. "This place is as dull as ditch-water. I wish I hadn't come West at all. I'm sure, *I've* had no fun."

"Well, you've made enough trouble, if you

haven't had a good time," Jane Ann said, frankly.

"I must say you're polite to your guests," exclaimed Mary Cox, viciously.

"And I must say you're anything but polite to me," responded the ranch girl, not at all abashed. "You're pretty near the limit, *you* are. Somebody ought to give you a good shaking."

Ruth and Helen had gotten so far ahead because they had not wasted their breath. Now they were waiting for the other three who came puffing to the shelf on which the chums rested, all three wearing frowns on their faces.

"For pity's sake!" gasped Helen; "what's the matter with you all?"

"I'm tired," admitted Madge, throwing herself upon the short turf.

"This girl says it's all foolishness to climb up here," said Jane Ann, pointing at The Fox.

"Oh, I want to reach the very summit, now I've started," cried Ruth.

"That's silly,' declared Mary Cox.

"You're just as cross as a bear," began the Western girl, when Helen suddenly shrieked:

"Oh, *oh!* Will you look at that? *What is it?*"

Ruth had already started on. She did not wish to have any words with The Fox. A rod or more separated her from her mates. Out of an aperture heretofore unnoticed, and between Ruth and

the other girls, was thrust the shaggy head and shoulders of a huge animal.

"A dog!" cried Madge.

"It's a wolf!" shrieked Mary Cox.

But the Western girl knew instantly what the creature was. "Run, Ruthie!" she shouted. "I'll call Jib and the boys. *It's a bear!*"

And at that moment Bruin waddled fully out of the hole—a huge, hairy, sleepy looking beast. He was between Ruth and her friends, and his awkward body blocked the path by which they were climbing to the summit of the natural bridge.

"Wu-uh-uh-uff!" said the bear, and swung his head and huge shoulders from the group of four girls to the lone girl above him.

"Run, Ruth!" shrieked Helen.

Her cry seemed to startle the ursine marauder. He uttered another grunt of expostulation and started up the steep path. Nobody needed to advise Ruth to run a second time. She scrambled up the rocks with an awful fear clutching at her heart and the sound in her ears of the bear's sabre-like claws scratching over the path!

CHAPTER XII

THE MAN FROM TINTACKER

RUTH was just as scared as she could be. Although the bear did not seem particularly savage, there surely was not room enough on the path for him and Ruth to pass. The beast was ragged and gray looking. His little eyes twinkled and his tongue lolled out of his mouth, like that of an ox when it is plowing. Aside from a grunt, or two, he made at first no threatening manifestation.

Helen could not remain inactive and see a bear chase her chum over the rocks; therefore she picked up a good-sized stone and threw it at the beast. They say—at least, boys say!—that a girl can't throw straight. But Helen hit the bear!

The stone must have hurt, for the beast let out a sudden growl that was in quite a different tone from the sounds he had made before. He turned sharply and bit at the place on his flank where the stone had hit him, and then, in a perfectly unreasonable manner, the bear turned sharp around and scampered after Ruth harder than ever. It was plain that he blamed her for throwing the stone. At least, she was nearest to him, and the

bear was anxious to get out of the way of the screaming girls below.

Ruth did not give voice to her fear. Perhaps if she had shrieked as The Fox did the bear would have been afraid of her. As it was, he came on, growling savagely. And in half a minute he was fairly upon her heels!

The way up the height was in a gully with steep sides. Ruth, casting back over her shoulder a single terrified glance, saw the lumbering beast right upon her heels. The rocks on either hand were too steep to climb; it seemed as though the bear would seize her in a moment.

And then it was that the miracle happened. It seemed as though the girl *must* be torn and mangled by the bear, when a figure darted into sight above her. A voice shouted:

"Lie down! Lie down, so I can shoot!"

It was a man with a gun. In the second Ruth saw him she only knew he was trying to draw bead on the pursuing bear. She had no idea what her rescuer looked like—whether he was old, or young.

It took courage to obey his command. But Ruth had that courage. She flung herself forward upon her hands and knees and—seemingly—at the same instant the man above fired.

The roar of the weapon in the rocky glen and the roar of the stricken bear, was a deafening

combination of sound. The bullet had hit the big brute somewhere in a serious spot and he was rolling and kicking on the rocks—his first throes of agony flinging him almost to Ruth's feet.

But the girl scrambled farther away and heard the rifle speak again. A second bullet entered the body of the bear. At the same time a lusty shout arose from below. The boys and Jib having explored the river-tunnel as far as they found it practicable, had returned to the camp and there discovered where the girls had gone. Jib hastened after them, for he felt that they should not be roaming over the rocks without an armed escort.

"Hi, yi!" he yelped, tearing up the path with a rifle in his hand. "Keep it up, brother! We're comin'!"

Tom and Bob came with him. Jib saw the expiring bear, and he likewise glimpsed the man who had brought bruin down. In a moment, however, the stranger darted out of sight up the path and they did not even hear his footsteps on the rocks.

"Why, that's that feller from Tintacker!" cried the Indian. "Hey, you!"

"Not the crazy man?" gasped Jane Ann.

"Oh, surely he'll come back?" said Helen.

Ruth turned, almost tempted to run after the stranger. "Do you really mean to say it is the

young man who has been staying at the Tintacker properties so long?" she asked.

"That's the feller."

"We'd ought to catch him and see what Uncle Bill has to say to him about the fire," said Jane Ann.

"Oh, we ought to thank him for shooting the bear," cried Madge

"And I wanted to speak with him so much!" groaned Ruth; but nobody heard her say this. The others had gathered around the dead bear. Of a sudden a new discovery was made:

"Where's Mary?" cried Helen.

"The Fox has run away!" exclaimed Madge.

"I'll bet she has!" exclaimed Jane Ann Hicks. "Didn't you see her, Jib?"

"We didn't pass her on the path," said Tom.

Ruth's keen eye discovered the missing girl first. She ran with a cry to a little shelf upon which the foxy maid had scrambled when the excitement started. The Fox was stretched out upon the rock in a dead faint!

"Well! would you ever?" gasped Madge. "Who'd think that Mary Cox would faint? She's always been bold enough, goodness knows!"

Ruth had hurried to the shelf where The Fox lay. She was very white and there could be no doubt but that she was totally unconscious. Jib lent his assistance and getting her into his arms

he carried her bodily down the steep path to the camp, leaving Tom and Bob to guard the bear until he returned to remove the pelt. The other girls strung out after their fainting comrade, and the journey to the summit of the natural bridge was postponed indefinitely.

Cold water from the mountain stream soon brought The Fox around. But when she opened her eyes and looked into the face of the ministering Ruth, she muttered:

"And *you* saw him ,too!"

Then she turned her face away and began to cry.

"Aw, shucks!" exclaimed the ranchman's niece, "don't bawl none about it. The bear won't hurt you now. He's dead as can be."

But Ruth did not believe that Mary Cox was crying about the bear. Her words and subsequent actions *did* puzzle the girl of the Red Mill. Ruth had whispered to Tom, before they left the scene of the bear shooting:

"See if you can find that man. If you can, bring him into camp."

"But if he's crazy?" Tom suggested, in surprise.

"He isn't too crazy to have saved my life," declared the grateful girl. "And if he is in his right mind, all the more reason why we should try to help him."

"You're always right, Ruthie," admitted Helen's brother. But when the boy and Jib returned to camp two hours later, with the bear pelt and some of the best portions of the carcass, they had to report that the stranger who had shot the bear seemed to have totally disappeared. Jib Pottoway was no bad trailer; but over the rocks it was impossible to follow the stranger, especially as he had taken pains to hide his trail.

"If you want to thank that critter for saving you from the b'ar, Miss Ruthie," the Indian said, "you'll hafter go clear over to Tintacker to do so. That's my opinion."

"How far away is that?" demanded Mary Cox, suddenly.

"Near a hundred miles from this spot," declared Jib. "That is, by wagon trail. I reckon you could cut off thirty or forty miles through the hills. The feller's evidently l'arnt his way around since Winter."

Mary asked no further question about the man from Tintacker; but she had shown an interest in him that puzzled Ruth.

CHAPTER XIII

THE PARTY AT THE SCHOOLHOUSE

THE bear fight and the runaway together so disturbed the minds of the picnicking party in the canon that nobody objected to the suggestion of an early return to the ranchhouse. Ruth was secretly much troubled in her mind over the mysterious individual who had killed the bear. She had not seen her rescuer's face; but she wondered if Mary Cox had seen it?

The girls never did get to the top of the natural bridge. Jib and the boys in trying to trace the stranger had gone over the summit; but they did not tarry to look around. The girls and Ricardo got supper, immediately after which they set out on the return drive.

Jib insisted upon holding the lines over the backs of the team that had run away—and he saw that Mary Cox rode in that vehicle, too. But The Fox showed no vexation at this; indeed, she was very quiet all the way to Silver Ranch. She was much unlike her usual snappy, sharp-tongued self.

But, altogether, the party arrived home in very

good spirits. The wonders of the wild country—so much different from anything the Easterners had seen before—deeply impressed Ruth and her friends. The routine work of the ranch, however, interested them more. Not only Tom and Bob, but their sisters and the other girls, found the free, out-of-door life of the range and corral a never-failing source of delight.

Ruth herself was becoming a remarkably good horsewoman. Freckles carried her many miles over the range and Jane Ann Hicks was scarcely more bold on pony-back than was the girl from the Red Mill.

As for the cowboys of the Silver outfit, they admitted that the visitors were "some human," even from a Western standpoint.

"Then friends o' yourn, Miss Jinny," Jimsey said, to Old Bill's niece, "ain't so turrible 'Bawston' as some tenderfoots I've seen." ("Boston," according to Jimsey, spelled the ultra-East and all its "finicky" ways!) "I'm plum taken with that Fielding gal—I sure am. And I believe old Ike, here, is losin' his heart to her. Old Lem Dickson's Sally better bat her eyes sharp or Ike'll go up in the air an' she'll lose him."

It was true that the foreman was less bashful with Ruth than with any of the other girls. Ruth knew how to put him at his ease. Every spare hour Bashful Ike had he put in teaching Ruth to

improve her riding, and as she was an early riser they spent a good many morning hours cantering over the range before the rest of the young people were astir at Silver Ranch.

It was on one of these rides that Bashful Ike "opened up" to Ruth upon the subject of the red-haired school-teacher at the Crossing.

"I've jest plumb doted on that gal since she was knee-high to a Kansas hopper-grass," the big puncher drawled. "An' she knows it well enough."

"Maybe she knows it too well?" suggested Ruth, wisely.

"Gosh!" groaned Ike. "I *gotter* keep her reminded I'm on the job—say, ain't I? Now, them candies you bought for me an' give to her—what do you s'pose she did with 'em?"

"She ate them if she had right good sense," replied Ruth, with a smile. "They were nice candies."

"I rid over to Lem's the next night," said Ike, solemnly, "an' that leetle pink-haired skeezicks opened up that box o' sweetmeats on the counter an' had all them lop-eared jack-rabbits that sits around her pa's store o' nights he'pin' themselves out o' *my* gift-box. Talk erbout castin' pearls before swine!" continued Bashful Ike, in deep disgust, "*that* was suah flingin' jewels to the hawgs, all right. Them 'ombres from the Two-Ten

outfit, an' from over Redeye way, was stuffin' down them bonbons like they was ten-cent gumdrops. An' Sally never ate a-one."

"She did that just to tease you," said Ruth, sagely.

"Huh!" grunted Ike. "I never laid out to hurt her feelin's none. Dunno why she should give me the quirt. Why, I've been hangin' about her an' tryin' to show her how much I think of her for years! She must know I wanter marry her. An' I got a good bank account an' five hundred head o' steers ter begin housekeepin' on."

"Does Sally know all that?" asked Ruth, slyly.

"Great Peter!" ejaculated Iket. "She'd oughter. Ev'rybody else in the county does."

"But did you ever ask Sally right out to marry you?" asked the Eastern girl.

"She never give me a chance," declared Ike, gruffly.

"Chance!" gasped Ruth, wanting to laugh, but being too kind-hearted to do so. "What sort of a chance do you expect?"

"I never git to talk with her ten minutes at a time," grumbled Ike.

"But why don't you *make* a chance?"

"Great Peter!" cried the foreman again. "I can't throw an' hawg-tie her, can I? I never can

git down to facts with her—she won't let me."

"If I were a great, big man," said Ruth, her eyes dancing, "I surely wouldn't let a little wisp of a girl like Miss Dickson get away from me—if I wanted her."

"How am I goin' to he'p it?" cried Ike, in despair. "She's jest as sassy as a cat-bird. Ye can't be serious with her. She plumb slips out o' my fingers ev'ry time I try to hold her."

"You are going to the dance at the schoolhouse, aren't you?" asked Ruth.

"I reckon."

"Can't you get her to dance with you? And when you're dancing can't you ask her? Come right out plump with it."

"Why, when I'm a-dancin'," confessed Ike, "I can't think o' nawthin' but my feet."

"Your feet?" cried Ruth.

"Yes, ma'am. They're so e-tar-nal big I gotter keep my mind on 'em all the time, or I'll be steppin' on Sally's. An' if I trod on her jest wunst—wal, that would suah be my finish with her. She ain't got that red hair for nawthin'," concluded the woeful cowpuncher.

Ike was not alone at the Silver Ranch in looking forward to the party at the schoolhouse. Every man who could be spared of the — X o outfit ("Bar-Cross-Naught") planned to go to the Crossing Saturday night. Such a rummaging

of "war-bags" for fancy flannel shirts and brilliant ties hadn't occurred—so Old Bill Hicks said—within the remembrance of the present generation of prairie-dogs!

"Jest thinkin' about cavortin' among the gals about drives them 'ombres loco," declared the ranchman. "Hi guy! here's even Jimsey's got a bran' new shirt on."

"'Tain't nuther!" scoffed Bud. "Whar's your eyes, Boss? Don't you reckernize that gay and festive shirt? Jimsey bought it 'way back when Mis' Hills' twins was born."

"So it's as old as the Hills, is it?" grunted Mr. Hicks. "Wal, he ain't worn it right frequent in this yere neck o' woods—that I'll swear to! An' a purple tie with it—Je-ru-sha! Somebody'll take a shot at him in that combination of riotin' colors—you hear me!"

The girls too were quite fluttered over the prospect of attending the party. Helen had agreed to take her violin along and Bob offered to help out with the music by playing his harmonica—an instrument without which he never went anywhere, save to bed or in swimming!

"And I can't think of anything more utterly sad, Bobbie," declared his sister, "than your rendition of 'the Suwanee River' on that same mouth-organ. When it comes to your playing for square dances, I fear you would give our Western friends much cause for complaint—and many of

them, I notice, go armed," she continued, significantly.

"Huh!" sniffed Bob. "I guess I don't play as bad as all that. Busy Izzy could dance a jig to my playing."

"That's what I thought," responded Madge. "You're just about up to playing jig-tunes on that old mouth-organ."

Just the same, Bob slipped the harmonica into his pocket. "You never can tell what may happen," he grunted.

"It'll be something mighty serious, then, Bobbie, if it necessitates the bringing forth of that instrument of torture," said his sister, bound to have the last word.

At dusk the big automobile got away from Silver Ranch, surrounded by a gang of wall-eyed ponies that looked on the rattling machine about as kindly as they would have viewed a Kansas grain thrasher. The visitors and Jane Ann all rode in the machine, for even Ruth's Freckles would have turned unmanageable within sight and sound of that touring car.

"That choo-choo cart," complained Bud, the cowboy, "would stampede a battalion of hop-toads. Whoa, you Sonny! it ain't goin' tuh bite yuh." This to his own half-crazy mount. "Look out for your Rat-tail, Jimsey, or that yere purple necktie will bite the dust, as they say in the story-books."

The hilarious party from Silver Ranch, however, reached the Crossing without serious mishap. They were not the first comers, for there were already lines of saddle ponies as well as many various "rigs" hitched about Lem Dickson's store. The schoolhouse was lit brightly with kerosene lamps, and there was a string of Chinese lanterns hung above the doorway.

The girls, in their fresh frocks and furbelows, hastened over to the schoolhouse, followed more leisurely by their escorts. Sally Dickson, as chief of the committee of reception, greeted Jane Ann and her friends, and made them cordially welcome, although they were all some years younger than most of the girls from the ranches roundabout.

"If you Eastern girls can all dance, you'll sure help us out a whole lot," declared the brisk little school-mistress. "For if there's anything I do dispise it's to see two great, hulking men paired off in a reel, or a 'hoe-down.' And you brought your violin, Miss Cameron? That's fine! You can play without music, I hope?"

Helen assured her she thought she could master the simple dance tunes to which the assembly was used. There were settees ranged around the walls for the dancers to rest upon, and some of the matrons who had come to chaperone the affair were already ensconced upon these. There

was a buzz of conversation and laughter in the big room. The men folk hung about the door as yet, or looked in at the open windows.

"Did that big gump, Ike Stedman, come over with you-all, Miss Fielding?" Sally Dickson asked Ruth, aside. "Or did he know enough to stay away?"

"I don't believe Mr. Hicks could have kept him on the ranch to-night," replied Ruth, smiling. "He has promised to dance with me at least once. Ike is an awfully nice man, I think—and so kind! He's taught us all to ride and is never out of sorts, or too busy to help us out. We 'tenderfoots' are always getting 'bogged,' you know. And Ike is right there to help us. We all like him immensely."

Sally looked at her suspiciously. "Humph!" said she. "I never expected to hear that Bashful Ike was so popular."

"Oh, I assure you he is," rejoined Ruth, calmly. "He is developing into quite a lady's man."

Miss Dickson snorted. Nothing else could explain her method of emphatically expressing her disbelief. But Ruth was determined that the haughty little school-mistress should have her eyes opened regarding Bashful Ike before the evening was over, and she proceeded to put into execution a plan she had already conceived on the way over from Silver Ranch.

CHAPTER XIV

BASHFUL IKE COMES OUT STRONG

RUTH first of all took Jane Ann into her confidence. The ranchman's niece had been going about the room renewing her acquaintance with the "neighbors," some of whom lived forty miles from Silver Ranch. The Western girl was proud of the friends she had made "Down East," too, and she was introducing them all, right and left. But Ruth pinched her arm and signified that she wished to see her alone for a moment.

"Now, Nita," the girl from the Red Mill whispered, "we want to see that Mr. Stedman has a good time to-night. You know, he's been awfully good to us all."

"Bashful Ike?" exclaimed Jane Ann.

"Yes. And we must give him so good a time that he will forget to be bashful."

"He's a right good feller—yes," admitted Jane Ann, somewhat puzzled. "But what can we do for him?"

"Every one of us girls from the ranch must dance with him."

"Oh, crickey!" chuckled Jane Ann, suddenly.

"You want to try to make Sally Dickson jealous, don't you?"

"No. I only want to make her see that Ike is popular, even if she doesn't think him worth being kind to. And Ike *is* worth being kind to. He's a gentleman, and as kind-hearted a man as I ever saw."

"He's all of that," admitted the Western girl. "But he's so clumsy——"

"Forget that!" exclaimed Ruth. "And make *him* forget his clumsiness. He's as good as gold and deserves better treatment at the hands of Sally than he has been getting. Of course, she won't be jealous of us young girls——"

"Humph! 'Young girls,' " scoffed Jane Ann. "I don't think we're so awful young."

"Well, we're too young to be accused of trying to take Sally's beau away from her," cried Ruth, merrily. "Now, you'll make him dance with you —and first, too. He'll have to if you say so, for he's your uncle's foreman."

"I'll do it," agreed Jane Ann.

Ruth of course found Helen ready and willing to agree to her plan, and Madge did not need much urging. They all liked Ike Stedman, and although the brisk little school-mistress seemed to be a very nice girl, the foreman of Silver Ranch was quite worthy of her.

"If he dares to dance with me," chuckled

Heavy, "I am willing to keep it up all the evening. That is, if you think such a course, Ruthie, will awaken Miss Dickson to poor Ike's good points."

"And how about those blisters you were complaining about the other day?" asked Madge, slyly.

"Pshaw! what girl ever remembered blisters when she could dance?" responded the stout girl, with scorn.

Ruth had all but The Fox in line when the violin struck up the first number; she did not think it wise to speak to Mary about the plan, for she feared that the latter would refuse to coöperate. The boys came straggling in at the first notes of Helen's violin, and there were no medals on Ike Stedman for bashfulness at first. Tom Cameron, spurred on by his sister, broke the ice and went at once to the school-teacher and asked for the dance. Bob followed suit by taking Mary Cox for a partner (Mary engineered *that*), and soon the sets began to form while Helen played her sprightliest.

The young men crowded in awkwardly and when Jane Ann saw the tall figure of Ike just outside the door she called to him:

"Come on in, Mr. Stedman. You know this is our dance. Hurry up!"

Now Ike usually did get up sufficient

courage to appear upon the floor until half the evening was over, and there was a deal of chuckling and nudging when the foreman, his face flaming, pushed into the room. But he could not escape "the boss' niece." Jane Ann deliberately led him into the set of which Tom and Sally Dickson were the nucleus.

"My great aunt!" groaned Ike. "Just as like as not, honey, I'll trample all over you an' mash yo' feet. It's like takin' life in your han's to dance with me."

"Mebbe I better take my feet in my hands, according to your warning, Ike," quoth Jane Ann. "Aw, come on, I reckon I can dodge your feet, big as they are."

Nor did Bashful Ike prove to be so poor a dancer, when he was once on the floor. But he went through the figures of the dance with a face —so Jane Ann said afterward—that flamed like a torchlight procession every time he came opposite to Sally Dickson.

"I see you're here early, Mr. Stedman," said the red-haired schoolmistress, as she was being swung by the giant cow puncher in one of the figures. "Usually you're like Parson Brown's cow's tail—always behind!"

"They drug me in, Sally—they just drug me in," explained the suffering Ike.

"Well, do brace up and look a little less like

you was at your own funeral!" snapped the schoolmistress.

This sharp speech would have completely quenched Ike's desire to dance had Ruth not laid her plans so carefully. The moment the music ceased and Ike made for the door, Heavy stopped him. She was between the bashful cow puncher and all escape—unless he went through the window!

"Oh, Mr. Stedman! I do so want to dance," cried the stout girl, with her very broadest and friendliest smile. "Nobody asked me to this time, and I just know they're all afraid of me. Do I look as though I bite?"

"Bless you, no, Miss!" responded the polite foreman of Silver Ranch. "You look just as harmless as though you'd never cut a tooth, as fur as that goes!"

"Then you're not afraid to dance the next number with me?" There! Helen's tuning up."

"If you re'lly want me to, Miss," exclaimed the much-flurried foreman. "But I won't mislead ye. I ain't a good dancer."

"Then there will be a pair of us," was Heavy's cheerful reply. "If the other folk run off the floor, we'll be company for each other."

Carefully rehearsed by Ruth Fielding, Jennie Stone likewise picked the group of dancers of which Sally Dickson and a new partner were

members; and once again Bashful Ike found himself close to the object of his adoration.

"Hullo, Ike! you back again?" demanded Sally, cheerfully, as they clasped hands in a "walk-around." I believe you are getting to be a regular lady's man."

"Aw—now—Sally!"

"So that Ruth Fielding says," laughed Sally. "You're sure popular with those youngsters."

Ike grinned feebly. But he was feeling better. He had actually forgotten his feet—even in Sally's presence. Jennie Stone, although an all too solid bit of humanity, was remarkably light upon her feet when it came to dancing. Indeed, she was so good a dancer that she steered Ike over the floor to such good purpose that he—as well as other people—began to believe that Bashful Ike was no more awkward than the next man off the range.

"Why, Ruthie!" whispered Madge Steele, who was the next "victim" in line. "Ike is a regular Beau Brummel beside some of these fellows. Look at Heavy steering him around! And look at the teacher watching them. Humph! young lady I believe you're got a 'great head on you,' to quote Master Bobbie."

"Now, you be real nice to him, Madge," Ruth urged.

"Of course I shall, child," replied Miss Steele,

with her most "grown-uppish" air. "He's nice anyway; and if we can 'wake teacher' up to his importance, I'll gladly do my part."

"If it only gives him a grain of confidence in himself, I shall be satisfied," declared Ruth. "That is what Ike lacks."

The foreman of Silver Ranch was coming out pretty strong, however. The Virginia Reel was the favorite dance, and when Helen stopped playing the applause was so great, that she responded with a repetition of the whole figure; so Ike and Heavy continued on the floor for a much longer period, and the big cowpuncher gained more ease of manner. When they ceased dancing the stout girl led her escort right into the clutches of Madge Steele.

Now, Madge was taller than the schoolmistress and in her city-made grown looked years older. The boys were rather afraid of Madge when she "put on the real thing," as her brother inelegently expressed it, for she seemed then quite a young lady grown!

"I really believe you Western men are gallant, Mr. Stedman," she announced. "Chivalrous, and unafraid, and bold, and all that. I am deeply disappointed."

"How's that, Miss?" exclaimed poor Ike.

"I haven't had an invitation to dance yet," pursued Madge. "If I had scarletina, or the

measles—or even the mumps—I do not think I should be more avoided by the male portion of the assembly. What do you suppose is the matter with me, Mr. Stedman?"

"Why, I—I——"

Ike was on the verge of declaring that he would find her a partner if he had to use a gun to get one to come forward; but he was inspired for once to do the right thing. He really bowed before Madge with something of a flourish, as the tinkle of the violin strings began again.

"If you think you can stand *me,* Miss Steele," declared the big foreman, "I'd be near about tickled to death to lead you out myself."

"You are very good," said Madge, demurely. "But are you sure—I think that pretty little teacher is looking this way. You are not neglecting any old friends for *me,* I hope, Mr. Stedman?"

Ike's face flamed again furiously. He stole a glance at Sally Dickson, who had just refused Jimsey for a partner—and with sharpness.

"I'm pretty sure I'll be a whole lot better off with you, Miss," he admitted. "Jest now, especially."

Madge's ringing laugh caught Sally's ear, as the Eastern girl bore the foreman of Silver Ranch off to join the next set of dancers. The teacher did not dance that number at all.

Mrs. "Jule" Marvin, the young and buxom wife of the owner of the Two-Ten Ranch, caught Ike's hand and whispered loudly:

"I never suspected you was such a heart-breaker, Ike. Goodness me! you're dancing every dance, and with a new partner each time. I haven't got to be left out in the cold just because I'm married to Tom, I hope? He can't dance with that game leg, poor old man! You going to save a dance for me, Ike?"

"Suah's your bawn, honey!" responded the foreman, who was beginning to enjoy his prominence and had known Mrs. Jule for years. "The next one's yours if you say the word."

"You're my meat, then, Ike," declared the jolly Western matron, as she glided away with her present partner.

So there was a little rift in Ruth Fielding's scheme, for Ike danced next with the ranchman's wife. But that pleased the girl from the Red Mill and her fellow conspirators quite as well. Ike was no neglected male "wall-flower." Sally only skipped one dance; but she watched the big foreman with growing wonder.

A rest was due Helen anyway; and Bob Steele was at hand with his never-failing harmonica. "The heart-rending strains," as Madge termed the rather trying music from the mouth-organ, were sufficiently lively for most of the party, and

the floor was filled with dancers when Helen captured Ike and he led her into a set just forming.

"You must be the best dancer among the men, Mr. Ike," declared Ruth's chum, dimpling merrily. "You are in such demand."

"I b'lieve you gals have jest been ladlin' the syrup intuh me, Miss Cam'ron," Ike responded, but grinning with growing confidence. "It's been mighty nice of you."

"You'd better give Sally a chance pretty soon," whispered Helen. "There is surely fire in her eye."

"Great Peter!" groaned Ike. "I'm almost afraid to meet up with her now."

"Pluck up your spirit, sir!" commanded Helen. And she maneuvered so that, when the dance was done, they stood right next to Sally Dickson and her last partner.

"Well, ain't you the busy little bee, Ike," said the school-teacher, in a low voice. "Are you bespoke for the rest of the evening? These youngones certainly have turned your head."

"Me, Sally?" responded her bashful friend. "They like tuh dance, I reckon, like all other young things—an' the other boys seem kinder backward with 'em; 'cause they're Bawston, I s'pose."

"Humph!" ejaculated Miss Sally; "you ain't such a gump as to believe all that. That little

Smartie, Ruth Fielding, planned all this, I bet a cent!"

"Miss Ruth?" queried Ike, in surprise. "Why, I ain't danced with her at all."

"Nor you ain't a-goin' to!" snapped Sally. "You can dance with me for a spell now." And for the remainder of that hilarious evening Sally scarcely allowed Bashful Ike out of her clutches.

CHAPTER XV

"THE NIGHT TRICK"

THE party at the schoolhouse was declared a success by all Jane Ann Hick's Eastern friends—saving, of course, The Fox. She had only danced with Tom and Bob and had disproved haughtily of the entire proceedings. She had pronounced Ruth's little plot for getting Ike and Sally together, "a silly trick," although the other girls had found considerable innocent enjoyment in it, and the big foreman of Silver Ranch rode home with them after midnight in a plain condition of ecstacy.

"Ike suah has made the hit of his life," Jimsey declared, to the other cowboys.

"He was the 'belle of the ball' all right," chimed in another.

"If I warn't a person of puffectly tame an' gentle nature, I'd suah be a whole lot jealous of his popularity," proceeded he of the purple necktie. "But I see a-many of you 'ombres jest standin' around and a-gnashin' of your teeth at the way Ike carried off the gals."

"Huh!" grunted Bud. "We weren't gnashin' no teeth at old Ike. What put our grinders on

edge was that yere purple necktie an' pink-striped shirt you're wearin'. Ev'ry gal that danced with you, Jimsey, was in danger of gettin' cross-eyed lookin' at that ne-fa-ri-ous combination."

Sunday was a quiet day at the ranch. Although there was no church nearer than Bullhide, Bill Hicks made a practice of doing as little work as possible on the first day of the week, and his gangs were instructed to simply keep the herds in bounds.

At the ranch house Ruth and her girl friends arranged a song-service for the evening to which all the men about the home corral, and those who could be spared to ride in from the range, were invited. This broke up several card games in the bunk house—games innocent in themselves, perhaps, but an amusement better engaged in on week days.

The boys gathered in the dusk on the wide porch and listened to the really beautiful music that the girls had learned at Briarwood Hall. Ruth was in splendid voice, and her singing was applauded warmly by the cowboys.

"My soul, Bud!" gasped Jimsey. "Couldn't that leetle gal jest sing a herd of millin' cattle to by-low on the night trick, with that yere voice of hers?"

"Uh-huh!" agreed Bud. 'She could stop a stampede, she could."

"Oh, I'd love to see a real stampede!" exclaimed Helen, who overheard this conversation.

"You would eh?" responded Jane Ann. "Well, here's hoping you never get your wish—eh, boys?"

"Not with the Bar-Cross-Naught outfit, Miss Jinny," agreed Bud, fervently.

"But it must be a wonderful sight to see so many steers rushing over the plain at once—all running as tight as they can run," urged the innocent Helen.

"Ya-as," drawled Jimsey. "But I want it to be some other man's cattle."

"But do you really ever have much trouble with the cattle?" asked Helen. "They all look so tame."

"Except Old Trouble-Maker," laughed her twin, who stood beside her.

"Looks jest like a picnic, herdin' them mooley-cows, don't it?" scoffed Jimsey.

"They'd ought to be on the night trick, once," said Jane Ann. "It's all right punching cows by daylight."

"What's the night trick?" asked Heavy.

"Night herding. That's when things happen to a bunch of cows," explained the ranchman's neice.

"I believe that must be fun," cried Ruth, who had come out upon the porch. "Can't we go

out to one of the camps and see the work by night as well as by day?"

"Good for you, Ruth!" cried Tom Cameron. "That's the game."

"Oh, I wouldn't want to do that," objected Mary Cox. "We'd have to camp out."

"Well, them that don't want to go can stay here," Jane Ann said, quickly. If anything was needed to enlist her in the cause it was the opposition of The Fox. "I'll see what Uncle Bill says."

"But, will it be dangerous?" demanded the more careful Madge.

"I've ridden at night," said Jane Ann, proudly. "Haven't I, Jimsey?"

"Just so," admitted the cowboy, gravely. "But a whole bunch o' gals might make the critters nervous."

"Too many cows would sure make the girls nervous!" laughed Bob, grinning at his sister.

But the idea once having taken possession of the minds of Ruth and her girl friends, the conclusion was foregone. Uncle Bill at first (to quote Jane Ann) "went up in the air." When he came down to earth, however, his neice was right there, ready to argue the point with him and—as usual—he gave in to her.

"Tarnashun, Jane Ann!" exclaimed the old ranchman. 'I'll bet these yere gals don't get back

home without some bad accident happening. You-all are so reckless."

"Now Uncle Bill! don't you go to croaking," she returned, lightly. "Ain't no danger of trouble at all. We'll only be out one night. We'll go down to Camp Number Three—that's nearest."

"No, sir-ree! Them boys air too triflin' a crew," declared the ranchman. "Jib is bossing the Rolling River outfit just now. You can go over there. I can trust Jib."

As the rest of the party was so enthusiastic, and all determined to spend a night at Number Two Camp on the Rolling River Range, Mary Cox elected to go likewise. She declared she did not wish to remain at the ranch-house in the sole care of a "fat and greasy Mexican squaw," as she called the cook.

"Ouch! I bet that stings Maria when she knows how you feel about her," chuckled Heavy. "Why let carking care disturb your serenity, Mary? Come on and enjoy yourself like the rest of us."

"I don't expect to enjoy myself in any party that's just run by one girl," snapped Mary.

"Who's that?" asked the stout girl, in wonder.

"Ruth Fielding. She bosses everything. She thinks this is all her own copyrighted show—like

the Sweetbriars. Everything we do she suggests——"

"That shows how good a 'suggester' she is," interposed Heavy, calmly.

"It shows how she's got you all hypnotized into believing she's a wonder," snarled The Fox.

"Aw, don't Mary! Don't be so mean. I should think Ruth would be the last person *you'd* ever have a grouch on. She's done enough for you——"

"She hasn't, either!" cried Mary Fox, her face flaming.

"I'd like to know what you'd call it?" Heavy demanded, with a good deal of warmth for her. "If she wasn't the sweetest-tempered, most forgiving girl that ever went to Briarwood, *you'd* have lost your last friend long ago! I declare, I'm ashamed of you!"

"She's not my friend," said Mary, sullenly.

"Who is, then? She has helped to save your life on more than one occasion. She has never said a word about the time she fell off the rocks when we were at Lighthouse Point. You and she were together, and *you* know how it happened. Oh, I can imagine how it happened. Besides, Nita saw you, and so did Tom Cameron," cried the stout girl, more hotly. "Don't think all your tricks can be hidden."

"What do you suppose I care?" snarled Mary Cox.

"I guess you care what Tom Cameron thinks of you," pursued Heavy, wagging her head. "But after the way you started those ponies when we drove to Rolling River Canon, you can be sure that you don't stand high with him—or with any of the rest of the boys."

"Pooh! those cowboys! Great, uneducated gawks!"

"But mighty fine fellows, just the same. I'd a whole lot rather have their good opinion than their bad."

Now all this was, for Jennie Stone, pretty strong language. She was usually so mild of speech and easy-going, that its effect was all the greater. The Fox eyed her in some surprise and —for once—was quelled to a degree.

All these discussions occurred on Monday. The Rolling River Camp was twenty miles away in the direction of the mountain range. Tuesday was the day set for the trip. The party would travel with the supply wagon and a bunch of ponies for the herders, bossed by Maria's husband. On Wednesday the young folk would return under the guidance of little Ricarde, who was to go along to act as camp-boy.

"But if we like it out there, Uncle Bill, maybe we'll stay till Thursday," Jane Ann declared,

from her pony's back, just before the cavalcade left the ranch-house, very early on Tuesday.

"You better not. I'm going to be mighty busy around yere, and I don't want to be worried none," declared the ranchman. "And I sha'n't know what peace is till I see you-all back again."

"Now, don't worry," drawled his neice. "We ain't none of us sugar nor salt."

"I wish I could let Ike go with ye—that's what I wish," grumbled her uncle.

Ruth Fielding secretly wished the same. The direction of the Rolling River Camp lay toward Tintacker. She had asked the foreman about it.

"You'll be all of thirty mile from the Tintacker claims, Miss Ruth," Bashful Ike said. "But it's a straight-away trail from the ford a mile, or so, this side of the camp. Any of the boys can show you. And Jib might spare one of 'em to beau you over to the mine, if so be you are determined to try and find that 'bug'."

"I *do* want to see and speak with him," Ruth said, earnestly.

"It's pretty sure he's looney," said Ike. "You won't make nothing out o' him. I wouldn't bother."

"Why, he saved my life!" cried Ruth. "I want to thank him. I want to help him. And—and—indeed, I need very much to see and speak with him, Ike."

"Ya-as. That does make a difference," admitted the foreman. "He sure did kill that bear."

The ponies rattled away behind the heavy wagon, drawn by six mules. In the lead cantered Ricarde and his father, herding the dozen or more half-wild cow-ponies. The Mexican horse-wrangler was a lazy looking, half-asleep fellow; but he sat a pony as though he had grown in the saddle.

Ruth, on her beloved little Freckles, rode almost as well now as did Jane Ann. The other girls were content to follow the mule team at a more quiet pace; but Ruth and the ranchman's neice dashed off the trail more than once for a sharp race across the plain.

"You're a darling, Ruthie!" declared Jane Ann, enthusiastically. "I wish you were going to live out here at Silver Ranch all the time—I do! I wouldn't mind being 'buried in the wilderness' if you were along——"

"Oh, but you won't be buried in the wilderness all the time," laughed the girl from the Red Mill. "I am sure of that."

"Huh!" ejaculated the Western girl, startled. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that we've been talking to Uncle Bill," laughed Ruth.

"Oh! you ain't got it fixed for me?" gasped the ranchman's neice. "Will he send me to school?"

"Surest thing you know, Nita!"

"Not to that boarding school you girls all go to?"

"Unless he backs down—and you know Mr. Bill Hicks isn't one of the backing-down kind."

"Oh, bully for you!" gasped Jane Ann. "I know it's your doing. I can see it all. Uncle Bill thinks the sun just about rises and sets with you."

"Helen and Heavy did their share. So did Madge—and even Heavy's aunt, Miss Kate, before we started West. You will go to Briarwood with us next half, Nita. You'll have a private teacher for a while so that you can catch up with our classes. It's going to be up to you to make good, young lady—that's all."

Jane Ann Hicks was too pleased at that moment to say a word—and she had to wink mighty hard to keep the tears back. Weeping was as much against her character as it would have been against a boy's. And she was silent thereafter for most of the way to the camp.

They rode over a rolling bit of ground and came in sight suddenly of the great herd in care of Number Two outfit. Such a crowd of slowly moving cattle was enough to amaze the eastern visitors. For miles upon miles the great herd overspread the valley, along the far side of which the hurrying river flowed. The tossing horns, the lowing of the cows calling their young, the

strange, bustling movement of the whole mass, rose up to the excited spectators in a great wave of sound and color. It was a wonderful sight!

Jib rode up the hill to meet them. The men on duty were either squatting here and there over the range, in little groups, playing cards and smoking, or riding slowly around the outskirts of the herd. There was a chuck-tent and two sleeping tents parked by the river side, and the smoke from the cook's sheet-iron stove rose in a thin spiral of blue vapor toward that vaster blue that arched the complete scene.

"What a picture!" Ruth said to her chum. "The mountains are grand. That canon we visited was wonderful. The great, rolling plains dwarf anything in the line of landscape that we ever saw back East. But *this* caps all the sights we have seen yet."

"I'm almost afraid of the cattle, Ruthie," declared Helen. "So many tossing horns! So many great, nervous, moving bodies! Suppose they should start this way—run us down and stamp us into the earth? Oh! they could do it easily."

"I don't feel that fear of them," returned the girl from the Red Mill. "I mean to ride all around the herd to-night with Nita. She says she is going to help ride herd, and I am going with her."

This declaration, however, came near not being

fulfilled. Jib Pottoway objected. The tent brought for the girls was erected a little way from the men's camp, and the Indian stated it as his irrevocable opinion that the place for the lady visitors at night was inside the white walls of that tent.

"Ain't no place for girls on the night trick, Miss Jinny—and you know it," complained Jib. "Old Bill will hold me responsible if anything happens to you."

"'Twon't be the first time I've ridden around a bunch of beeves after sundown," retorted Jane Ann, sharply. "And I've promised Ruth. It's a real nice night. I don't even hear a coyote singing."

"There's rain in the air. We may have a blow out of the hills before morning," said Jib, shaking his head.

"Aw shucks!" returned the ranchman's neice. "If it rains we can borrow slickers, can't we? I never saw such a fellow as you are, Jib. Always looking for trouble."

"You managed to get into trouble the other day when you went over to the canon," grunted the Indian.

"'Twarn't Ruthie and me that made you trouble. And that Cox girl wouldn't dare ride within forty rods of these cows," laughed the ranchman's neice.

So Jib was forced to give way. Tom and Bob had craved permission to ride herd, too. The cowboys seemed to accept these offers in serious mood, and that made Jane Ann suspicious.

"They'll hatch up some joke to play on you-all," she whispered to Ruthie. "But we'll find out what they mean to do, if we can, and just cross-cut 'em."

The camp by the river was the scene of much hilarity at supper time. The guests had brought some especially nice rations from the ranch-house, and the herders welcomed the addition to their plain fare with gusto. Tom and Bob ate with the men and, when the night shift went on duty, they set forth likewise to ride around the great herd which, although seemingly so peacefully inclined, must be watched and guarded more carefully by night than by day.

Soon after Jane Ann and Ruth rode forth, taking the place together of one of the regular herders. These additions to the night gang left more of the cow punchers than usual at the camp, and there was much hilarity among the boys as Jane Ann and her friend cantered away toward the not far-distant herd.

"Those fellows are up to something," the ranchman's neice repeated. "We must be on the watch for them—and don't you be scared none, Ruthie, at anything that may happen."

CHAPTER XVI

THE JOKE THAT FAILED

THE two girls rode into the melting darkness of the night, and once out of the radiance of the campfires became suddenly appreciative of the subdued sounds arising from the far-extending valley in which the herd lay

At a great distance a coyote howled in mournful cadence. There was the uncertain movements of the cattle on the riders' left hand—here one lapped its body with its great tongue—again horns clashed—then a big steer staggered to its feet and blew through its nostrils a great sigh. There was, too, the steady chewing of many, many cuds.

A large part of the herd was lying down. Although stars flecked the sky quite thickly the whole valley in which the cattle fed seemed overmantled with a pall of blackness. Shapes loomed through this with sudden, uncertain outline.

"My! it's shivery, isn't it?" whispered Ruth.

"There won't nothing bite us," chuckled the Western girl. "Huh! what's that?"

The sudden change in her voice made Ruth giggle nervously. "That's somebody riding ahead of us. *You're* not afraid, Nita?"

"Well, I should say not!" cried the other, very boldly. "It's one of the boys. Hello, Darcy! I thought you were a ghost."

"You gals better git back to the camp," grunted the cowboy. "We're going to have a shower later. I feel it in the air."

"We're neither sugar nor salt," declared Jane Ann. "We've both got slickers on our saddles."

"Ridin' herd at night ain't no job for gals," said Darcy. "And that cloud yander is goin' ter spit lightnin'."

"He's always got a grouch about something. I never did like old Darcy," Jane Ann confided to her friend.

But there was a general movement and confusion in the herd before the girls had ridden two miles. The cattle smelled the storm coming and, now and then, a faint flash of lightning penciled the upper edge of the cloud that masked the Western horizon.

"'Tain't going to amount to anything," declared Jane Ann.

"It just looks like heat lightning," agreed Ruth.

"May not rain at all to-night," pursued the other girl, cheerfully.

"Who's that yelling?" queried Ruth, suddenly.

"Huh! that's somebody singing."

"Singing?"

"Yep."

"'Way out here?"

"Yep. It's Fred English, I guess. And he's no Caruso."

"But what's he singing for?" demanded the disturbed Ruth, for the sounds that floated to their ears were mournful to a degree.

"To keep the cattle quiet," explained the ranch girl. "Singing often keeps the cows from milling——"

"Milling?" repeated Ruth.

"That's when they begin to get uneasy, and mill around and around in a circle. Cows are just as foolish as a flock of hens."

"But you don't mean to say the boys sing 'em to sleep?" laughed Ruth.

"Something like that. It often keeps 'em quiet. Lets 'em know there's humans about."

"Why, I really thought he must be making that noise to keep himself from feeling lonely," chuckled Ruth.

"Nobody'd want to do that, you know," returned Jane Ann, with seriousness. "Especially when they can't sing no better than that Fred English."

"It is worse than a mourning dove," com-

plained the girl from the East. "Why doesn't he try something a bit livelier?"

"You don't want to whistle a jig-tune to keep cows quiet," Jane Ann responded, sagely.

The entire herd seemed astir now. There was a sultriness in the air quite unfamiliar on the range. The electricity still glowed along the horizon; but it seemed so distant that the girls much doubted Darcy's prophecy of rain.

The cattle continued to move about and crop the short herbage. Few of them remained "bedded down." In the distance another voice was raised in song. Ruth's mount suddenly jumped to one side, snorting. A huge black steer rose up and blew a startled blast through his nostrils.

"Gracious! I thought that was a monster rising out of the very earth! And so did Freckles, I guess," cried Ruth, with some nervousness. "Whoa, Freckles! Whoa, pretty!"

"You sing, too, Ruthie," advised her friend. "We don't want to start some foolish steer to running."

The Eastern girl's sweet voice—clear and strong—rang out at once and the two girls rode on their way. The movement of the herd showed that most of the cattle had got upon their feet; but there was no commotion.

As they rode around the great herd they occasionally passed a cowboy riding in the other direc-

tion, who hailed them usually with some witicism. But if Ruth chanced to be singing, they broke off their own refrains and applauded the girl's effort.

Once a coyote began yapping on the hillside near at hand, as Ruth and Jane Ann rode. The latter jerked out the shiny gun that swung at her belt and fired twice in the direction of the brute's challenge.

"That'll scare *him*," she explained. "They're a nuisance at calving time."

Slowly, but steadily, the cloud crept up the sky and snuffed out the light of the stars. The lightning, however, only played at intervals, with the thunder muttering hundreds of miles away, in the hills.

"It *is* going to rain, Nita," declared Ruth, with conviction.

"Well, let's put the rubber blankets over us, and be ready for it," said the ranch girl, cheerfully. "We don't want to go in now and have the boys laugh at us."

"Of course not," agreed Ruth.

Jane Ann showed her how to slip the slicker over her head. Its folds fell all about her and, as she rode astride, she would be well sheltered from the rain if it began to fall. They were now some miles from the camp on the river bank, but had not as yet rounded the extreme end of the

herd. The grazing range of the cattle covered practically the entire valley.

The stirring of the herd had grown apace and even in the thicker darkness the girls realized that most of the beasts were in motion. Now and then a cow lowed; steers snorted and clashed horns with neighboring beeves. The restlessness of the beasts was entirely different from those motions of a grazing herd by day.

Something seemed about to happen. Nature, as well as the beasts, seemed to wait in expectation of some startling change. Ruth could not fail to be strongly impressed by this inexplicable feeling.

"Something's going to happen, Nita. I feel it," she declared.

"Hark! what's that?" demanded her companion, whose ears were the sharper.

A mutter of sound in the distance made Ruth suggest: "Thunder?"

"No, no!" exclaimed Jane Ann.

Swiftly the sound approached. The patter of ponies' hoofs—a crowd of horses were evidently charging out of a nearby coulie into the open plain.

"Wild horses!" gasped Jane Ann.

But even as she spoke an eyrie, soul-wracking chorus of shrieks broke the oppressive stillness of the night. Such frightful yells Ruth had never

heard before—nor could she, for the moment, believe that they issued from the lips of human beings!

"Injuns!" ejaculated Jane Ann and swung her horse about, poising the quirt to strike. "Come on——"

Her words were drowned in a sudden crackle of electricity—seemingly over their very heads. They were blinded by the flash of lightning which, cleaving the cloud at the zenith, shot a zigzag stream of fire into the midst of the cattle!

Momentarily Ruth gained a view of the thousands of tossing horns. A chorus of bellowing rose from the frightened herd.

But Jane Ann recovered her self-confidence instantly. "It's nothing but a joke, Ruthie!" she cried, in her friend's ear. "That's some of the boys riding up and trying to frighten us. But there, that's no joke!"

Another bolt of lightning and deafening report followed. The cowboys' trick was a fiasco. There was serious trouble at hand.

"The herd is milling!" yelled Jane Ann. "Sing again, Ruthie! Ride close in to them and sing! We must keep them from stampeding if we can!" and she spurred her own pony toward the bellowing, frightened steers.

CHAPTER XVII

THE STAMPEDE

Be it said of the group of thoughtless cowboys (of whom were the wildest spirits of Number Two camp) that their first demonstration as they dashed out of the coulie upon the two girls was their only one. Their imitation of an Indian attack was nipped in the bud by the bursting of the electric storm. There was no time for the continuance of the performance arranged particularly to startle Jane Ann and Ruth Fielding. Ruth forgot the patter of the approaching ponies. She had instantly struck into her song—high and clear —at her comrade's advice; and she drew Freckles closer to the herd. The bellowing and pushing of the cattle betrayed their position in any case; but the intermittant flashes of lightning clearly revealed the whole scene to the agitated girls.

They were indeed frightened—the ranch girl as well as Ruth herself. The fact that this immense herd, crowding and bellowing together, might at any moment break into a mad stampede, was only too plain.

Caught in the mass of maddened cattle, the

girls might easily be unseated and trampled to death. Ruth knew this as well as did the Western girl. But if the sound of the human voice would help to keep the creatures within bounds, the girl from the Red Mill determined to sing on and ride closer in line with the milling herd.

She missed Jane Ann after a moment; but another flash of lightning revealed her friend weaving her pony in and out through the pressing cattle, using the quirt with free hand on the struggling steers and breaking them up into small groups.

The cowboys who had dashed out of the coulie saw the possibility of disaster instantly; and they, too, rode in among the bellowing steers. With so many heavy creatures pressing toward a common center, many would soon be crushed to death if the formation was not broken up. Each streak of lightning which played athwart the clouds added to the fear of the beasts. Several of the punchers rode close along the edge of the herd, driving in the strays. Now it began to rain, and as the very clouds seemed to open and empty the water upon the thirsty land, the swish of it, and the moaning of the wind that arose, added greatly to the confusion.

How it *did* rain for a few minutes! Ruth felt as though she were riding her pony beneath some huge water-spout. She was thankful for the

slicker, off which the water cataracted. The pony splashed knee-deep through runlets freshly started in the old buffalo paths. Here and there a large pond of water gleamed when the lightning lit up their surroundings.

And when the rain stopped as abruptly as it had begun, the cattle began to steam and were more troublesome than before. The lightning flashes and thunder continued, and when a second downpour of rain began it came so viciously, and with so great a wind, that the girls could scarcely ride against it.

Suddenly a shout came down the wind. It was taken up and repeated by voice after voice. The camp at the far end of the herd had been aroused ere this, of course, and every man who could ride was in the saddle. But it was at the camp-end of the herd, after all, that the first break came.

"They're off!" yelled Darcy, riding furiously past Ruth and Jane Ann toward where the louder disturbance had arisen.

"And toward the river!" shouted another of the cowboys.

The thunder of hoofs in the distance suddenly rose to a deafening sound. The great herd had broken away and were tearing toward the Rolling River at a pace which nothing could halt. Several of the cowboys were carried forward on the fore-front of the wave of maddened cattle; but

they all managed to escape before the leaders reached the high bank of the stream.

Jane Ann screamed some order to Ruth, but the latter could not hear what it was. Yet she imitated the Western girl's efforts immediately. No such tame attempts at controlling the cattle as singing to them was now in order. The small number of herdsmen left at this point could only force their ponies into the herd and break up the formation—driving the mad brutes back with their quirts, and finally, after a most desperate fight, holding perhaps a third of the great herd from running wildly into the stream.

This had been a time of some drouth and the river was running low. The banks were not only steep upon this side, but they were twenty feet and more high. When the first of the maddened beeves reached the verge of the bank they went headlong down the descent, and some landed at the edge of the water with broken limbs and so were trampled to death. But the plunging over of hundreds upon hundreds of steers at the same point, together with the washing of the falling rain, quickly cut down these banks until they became little more than steep quagmires in which the beasts wallowed more slowly to the river's edge.

This heavy going did more than aught else to retard the stampede; but many of the first-comers got over the shallow river and climbed upon the

plain beyond. All night long the cowboys were gathering up the herd upon the eastern shore of the river; those that had crossed must be left until day dawned.

And a very unpleasant night it was, although the stampede itself had been of short duration. A troop of cattle had dashed through the camp and flattened out the tent that had sheltered the lady visitors. Fortunately the said vistors had taken refuge in the supply wagon before the cattle had broken loose.

But, led by The Fox, there was much disturbance in the supply wagon for the time being. Fortunately a water-tight tarpaulin had kept the girls comparatively dry; but Mary Cox loudly expressed her wish that they had not come out to the camp, and the other girls were inclined to be a little fractious as well.

When Jane Ann and Ruth rode in, however, after the trouble was all over, and the rain had ceased, a new fire was built and coffee made, and the situation took on a more cheerful phase. Ruth was quite excited over it all, but glad that she had taken a hand in the herding of the cattle that had not broken away.

"And if you stay to help the boys gather the steers that got across the river, to-morrow, I am gong to help, too," she declared.

"Tom and Bob will help," Helen said. "I

wish I was as brave as you are, Ruth; but I really am afraid of these horned beasts."

"I never was cut out for even a milkmaid, myself," added Heavy. "When a cow bellows it makes me feel queer up and down my spine just as it does when I go to a menagerie and hear the lions roar."

"They won't bite you," sniffed Jane Ann.

"But they can hook you. And my! the noise they made when they went through this camp! You never heard the like," said the stout girl, shaking her head. No. I'm willing to start back for the ranch-house in the morning."

"Me, too," agreed Madge.

So it was agreed that the four timid girls should return to Silver Ranch with Ricarde after breakfast; but Ruth and Jane Ann, with Tom Cameron and Bob Steele, well mounted on fresh ponies, joined the gang of cow punchers who forded the river at daybreak to bring in the strays.

The frightened cattle were spread over miles of the farther plain and it was a two days' task to gather them all in. Indeed, on the second evening the party of four young folk were encamped with Jib Pottoway and three of the other punchers, quite twenty miles from the river and in a valley that cut deeply into the mountain chain which sheltered the range from the north and west.

"It is over this way that the trail runs to Tintacker, doesn't it, Jib?" Ruth asked the Indian, privately.

"Yes, Miss. Such trail as there is can be reached in half an hour from this camp."

"Oh! I do so want to see that man who killed the bear, Jib," urged the girl from the Red Mill.

"Well, it might be done, if he's over this way now," returned Jib, thoughtfully. "He is an odd stick—that's sure. Don't know whether he'd let himself be come up with. But——"

"Will you ride with me to the mines?" demanded Ruth, eagerly.

"I expect I could," admitted the Indian.

"I would be awfully obliged to you."

"I don't know what Mr. Hicks would say. But the cattle are in hand again—and there's less than a hundred here for the bunch to drive back. They can get along without me, I reckon."

"And surely without me!" laughed Ruth.

And so it was arranged. The Indian and Ruth were off up the valley betimes the next morning, while the rest of the party started for the river, driving the last of the stray beeves ahead of them.

CHAPTER XVIII

A DESPERATE CASE

JANE ANN and Tom Cameron had both offered to accompany Ruth; but for a very good—if secret—reason Ruth did not wish any of her young friends to attend her at the meeting which she hoped would occur between her and the strange young man who (if report were true) had been hanging about the Tintacker properties for so long.

She had written Uncle Jabez after her examination with the lawyer of the mining record books at Bullhide; but she had told her uncle only that the claims had been transferred to the name of "John Cox." That was the name, she knew, that the vacuum cleaner agent had given Uncle Jabez when he had interested the miller in the mine. But there was another matter in connecton with the name of "Cox" which Ruth feared would at once become public property if any of her young friends were present at the interview to which she now so eagerly looked forward.

Freckles, now as fresh as a pony could be, car-

ried Ruth rapidly up the valley, and as the two ponies galloped side by side the girl from the Red Mill grew quite confidential with the Indian. She did not like Jib Pottoway as she did the foreman of the Bar Cross Naught ranch; but the Indian was intelligent and companionable, and he quite evidently put himself out to be entertaining.

As he rode, dressed in his typical cowboy costume, Jib looked the full-blooded savage he was; but his conversation smacked of the East and of his experiences at school. What he said showed that Uncle Sam does very well by his red wards at Carlisle.

Jib could tell her, too, much that was interesting regarding the country through which they rode. It was wild enough, and there was no human habitation in sight. Occasionally a jackrabbit crossed their trail, or a flock of birds flew whirring from the path before them. Of other life there was none until they had crossed the first ridge and struck into a beaten path which Jib declared was the old pack-trail to Tintacker.

The life they then saw did not encourage Ruth to believe that this was either a safe or an inhabited country. Freckles suddenly shied as they approached a bowlder which was thrust out of the hillside beside the trail. Ruth was almost unseated, for she had been riding carelessly. And when she raised her eyes and saw the object that

had startled the pony, she was instantly frightened herself.

Crouching upon the summit of the rock was a lithe, tawny creature with a big, round, catlike head and flaming green eyes. The huge cat lashed its tail with evident rage and bared a very savage outfit of teeth.

"Oh! what's that?" gasped Ruth, as Freckles settled back upon his haunches and showed very plainly that he had no intention of passing the bowlder.

"Puma," returned the Indian, laconically.

His mount, too, was circling around the rock with mincing steps, quite as unfavorably disposed toward the beast as was Freckles.

"Can it leap this far, Jib?" cried Ruth.

"It'll leap a whole lot farther in just a minute," returned the Indian, taking the rope off his saddle bow. "Now, look out, Miss!'

Freckles began to run backward. The puma emitted a sudden, almost human shriek, and the muscles upon its foreshoulders swelled. It was about to leap.

Jib's rope circled in the air. Even as the puma left the rock, its four paws all "spraddled out" in midair, the noose dropped over the savage cat. The lariat caught the puma around its neck and one foreleg, and before it struck the ground Jib had whirled his horse and was spurring off across

the valley, his captive flying in huge (but involuntary) leaps behind him. He rode back in ten minutes with a beaten-out mass of fur and blood trailing at the end of his rope, and that was the end of Mr. Puma!

"There isn't any critter a puncher hates worse than a puma," Jib said, gruffly. "We've killed a host of 'em this season."

"And do you always rope them?" queried Ruth.

"They ain't worth powder and shot. Now, a bear is a gentleman 'side of a lion—and even a little old kiote ain't so bad. The lion's so blamed crafty and sly. Ha! it always does me good to rope one of them."

They rode steadily on the trail to the mines after that. It was scarcely more than fifteen miles to the claims which had been the site, some years before, of a thriving mining camp, but was now a deserted town of tumble-down shanties, corrugated iron shacks, and the rustied skeletons of machinery at the mouths of certain shafts. Money had been spent freely by individuals and corporations in seeking to develop the various "leads" believed by the first prospectors to be hidden under the surface of the earth at Tintacker. But if the silver was there it was so well hidden that most of the miners had finally "gone broke" attempting to uncover the riches of sil-

ver ore of which the first specimens discovered had given promise.

"The Tintacker Lode" it had been originally called, in the enthusiasm of its discoverers. But unless this strange prospector, who had hung about the abandoned claims for so many months, had struck into a new vein, the silver horde had quite "petered out." Of this fact Ruth was pretty positive from all the lawyer and Old Bill Hicks had told her. Uncle Jabez had gone into the scheme of re-opening the Tintacker on the strength of the vacuum-cleaner agent's personality and some specimens of silver ore that might have been dug a thousand miles from the site of the Tintacker claims.

"Don't look like there was anybody to home," grunted Jib Pottoway, as they rode up the last rise to the abandoned camp.

"Why! it's a wreck," gasped Ruth.

"You bet! There's hundreds of these little fly-by-night mining camps in this here Western country. And many a man's hopes are buried under the litter of those caved-in roofs. Hullo!"

"What's the matter?" asked Ruth, startled as she saw Jib draw his gun suddenly.

"What's that kiote doing diggin' under that door?" muttered the Indian.

The skulking beast quickly disappeared and Jib did not fire. He rode his pony directly to the

shack—one of the best of the group—and hammered on the door (which was closed) with the butt of his pistol.

"Hullo, in there!" he growled.

Ruth was not a little startled. "Why was the coyote trying to get in?" she asked.

"You wait out here, Miss," said Jib. "Don't come too close. Kiotes don't usually try to dig into a camp when the owner's at home."

"But you spoke as though you thought he might be there!" whispered the girl.

"I—don't—know," grunted Jib, climbing out of his saddle.

He tried the latch. The door swung open slowly. Whatever it was he expected to see in the shack, he was disappointed. When he had peered in for half a minute, he stuck the pistol back into its holster and strode over the threshhold.

"Oh! what is it?" breathed Ruth again.

He waved her back, but went into the hut. There was some movement there; then a thin, babbling voice said something that startled Ruth more than had the puma's yell.

"Gee!" gasped Jib, appearing in the doorway, his face actually pale under its deep tan. "It's the 'bug'."

"The man I want to see?" cried Ruth.

"But you can't see him. Keep away," ad-

vised Jib, stepping softly out and closing the door of the shack.

"What *is* the matter, Jib?" cried Ruth. "He —he isn't *dead?*"

"Not yet," replied the Indian.

"What is it, then?"

"Mountain fever—or worse. It's catching—just as bad as typhoid. You mustn't go in there, Miss."

"But—but— he'll die!" cried the girl, all her sympathy aroused. "Nobody to help him——"

"He's far gone. It's a desperate case, I tell you," growled Jib. "Ugh! I don't know what we'd better do. No wonder that kiote was trying to dig under the door. *He knew*—the hungry beast!"

CHAPTER XIX

THE MAN AT TINTACKER

RUTH waited for her companion to suggest their course of action. The man she had come to see—the mysterious individual whom she believed had taken her uncle's money to buy up the property known as the Tintacker Claim—was in a raging fever in that old shack near the site of the mine. She had heard his delirious babblings while Jib was in the hut. It never entered her mind that Jib would contemplate leaving the unfortunate creature unattended.

"You can't talk to him, Miss. He don't know nothing," declared the Indian. "And he's pretty far gone."

"What shall we do for him? What needs doing first?" Ruth demanded.

"Why, we can't do much—as I can see," grumbled Jib Pottoway.

"Isn't there a doctor——"

"At Bullhide," broke in Jib. "That's the nearest."

"Then he must be got. We must save this man, Jib," said the girl, eagerly.

"Save him?"

"Certainly. If only because he saved my life when I was attacked by the bear. And he must be saved for another reason, too."

"Why, Miss Ruth, he'll be dead long before a doctor could get here," cried Jib. "That's plumb ridiculous."

"He will die of course if he has no attention," said the girl, indignantly.

"Well?"

"Surely you won't desert him!"

"About all we can do for the poor fellow is to bury him," muttered Jib.

"If there was no other reason than that he is a helpless fellow-being, we could not go away and leave him here unattended," declared the girl, gravely. "You know that well enough, Jib."

"Oh, we'll wait around. But he's got to die. He's so far gone that nothing can save him. And I oughn't to go into the shack, either. That fever is contagious, and he's just full of it!"

"We must get help for him," cried Ruth, suddenly.

"What sort of help?" demanded the Indian.

"Why, the ranch is not so awfully far away, and I know that Mr. Hicks keeps a big stock of medicines. He will have something for this case."

"Then let's hustle back," said Jib. starting to climb into his saddle.

"But the coyote—and other savage beasts!" exclaimed Ruth.

"Gee! I forgot that," muttered Jib.

"One of us must stay here."

"Well—I can do that, I suppose. But how about you finding your way to the Rolling River outfit? I—don't—know."

"I'll stay here and watch," declared Ruth, firmly. "You ride for help—get medicine—tell Mr. Hicks to send for a doctor at Bullhide, too. I have some money with me and I know my Uncle Jasper will pay whatever it costs to get a doctor to this man. Besides—there are other people interested."

"Why, Miss, I don't know about this," murmured Jib Potoway. "It's risky to leave you here. Old Bill will be wild at me."

"I'm going to stay right here," declared Ruth, getting out of the saddle. "You can leave me your gun if you will——"

"Sure! I could do that. But I don't know what the boss'll say."

"It won't much matter what he says," said Ruth, with a faint smile. "I shall be here and he will be at Silver Ranch."

"Ugh!" muttered Jib. "But what'll he say to *me?*"

"I believe Mr. Hicks is too good-hearted to wish to know that we left this unfortunate young

man here without care. It would be too cruel."

"You wait till I look about the camp," muttered Jib, without paying much attention to Ruth's last remark.

He left his pony and walked quickly up the overgrown trail that had once been the main street of Tintacker Camp. Ruth slipped out of the saddle and ran to the door of the sick man's hut. She laid her hand on the latch, hesitated a moment, and then pushed the door open. There was plenty of light in the room. The form on the bed, under a tattered old blanket, was revealed. Likewise the flushed, thin face lying against the rolled-up coat for a pillow.

"The poor fellow!" gasped Ruth. "And suppose it should be *her* brother! Suppose it *should* be!"

Only for a few seconds did she stare in at the unfortunate fellow. His head began to roll from side to side on the hard pillow. He muttered some gibberish as an accompaniment to his fevered dreams. It was a young face Ruth saw, but so drawn and haggard that it made her tender heart ache.

"Water! water!" murmured the cracked lips of the fever patient.

"Oh! I can't stand this!" gasped the girl. She wheeled about and sent a long shout after Jib: "Jib! I say, Jib!"

"What's wantin'?" replied the Indian from around the bend in the trail.

"Bring some water! Get some fresh water somewhere."

"I get you!" returned the cowboy, and then, without waiting another instant, Ruth stepped into the infected cabin and approached the sufferer's couch.

The sick man's head moved incessantly; so did his lips. Sometimes what he said was audible; oftener it was just a hoarse murmur. But when Ruth raised his head tenderly and took out the old coat to refold it for a pillow, he screamed aloud and seized the garment with both hands and with an awful strength! His look was maniacal. There were flecks of foam on his lips and his eyes rolled wildly. There was more than ordinary delirium in his appearance, and he fought for possession of the coat, shrieking in a cracked voice, the sound of which went straight to Ruth's heart.

The sound brought Jib on the run.

"What in all tarnation are you doing in that shack?" he shouted. "You come out o' there!"

"Oh, Jib," said she, as the man fell back speechless and seemingly lifeless on the bed. "We can't leave him alone like this."

"That whole place is infected. You come out!" the puncher commanded.

"There's no use scolding me now, Jib," she

said, softly. "The harm is done, if it *is* to be done. I'm in here, and I mean to stay with him till you get help and medicine."

"You—you——"

"Don't call me names, but get the water. Find a pail somewhere. Bring plenty of cool water. He is burning up with fever and thirst."

"Well, the hawse is stole, I reckon!" grunted the Indian. "But you'd ought to be shaken. What the boss says to me about this will be a-plenty."

"Get the water, Jib!" commanded Ruth Fielding. "See! he breathes so hard. I believe he is dying of thirst more than anything else."

Jib grabbed the canteen that swung at the back of his saddle, emptied the last of the stale water on the ground, and hurried away to where a thin stream tumbled down the hillside behind one of the old shaft openings. He brought the canteen back full—and it held two quarts.

"Just a little at first," said the girl, pouring some of the cool water into her own folding cup that she carried in her pocket. "He mustn't have too much. And you keep out of the house, Jib. no use in both of us running the risk of catching the fever. You'll have to ride for help, too. And you don't want to take the infection among the other boys."

"You *are* a plucky one, Miss," admitted the

cowboy. "But there's bound to be the piper to pay for this. They'll say it was my fault."

"I won't let 'em," declared Ruth. She raised the sick man's head again and put the cup to his lips. "I wish I had some clean cloths. Oh! let somebody ride over from the camp with food and any stimulants that there may be there. See if you can find some larger receptacle for water before you go."

"She's a cleaner!" muttered the Indian, shaking his head, and walking away to do her bidding.

CHAPTER XX

THE WOLF AT THE DOOR

RUTH had the old coat folded and under the sick man's head again when Jib returned with a rusty old bucket filled with water. He set it down just outside the open door of the cabin—and he did not come in.

"What d'ye s'pose he's got in the pocket of that coat that he's so choice of, Miss?" he asked, curiously.

"Why! I don't know," returned Ruth, wetting her cleanest handkerchief and folding it to press upon the patient's brow.

"He hollered like a loon and grabbed at it when I tried to straighten it out," the Indian said, thoughtfully. "And so he did when you touched it."

"Yes."

"He's got something hid there. It bothers him even if he is delirious."

"Perhaps," admitted Ruth.

But she was not interested in this suspicion. The condition of the poor fellow was uppermost in her mind.

"You let me have your pistol, Jib," she said. "I can use it. It will keep that old coyote away."

"And anything else, too," said Jib, handing the gun to her and then stepping back to his pony. "I'll hobble your critter, Miss. Don't go far from the door. I'll either come back myself or send a couple of the boys from camp. They will bring food, anyway. I reckon the poor chap's hungry as well as thirsty."

"He is in a very bad way, indeed," returned Ruth, gravely. "You'll hurry, Jib?"

"Sure. But you'd better come back with me."

"No. I'm in for it now," she replied, trying to smile at him bravely. "I'd better nurse him till he's better, or——"

"You ain't got no call to do it!" exclaimed the Indian.

"There is more reason for my helping him than you know," she said, in a low voice. "Oh! there is a very good reason for my helping him."

"He's too far gone to be helped much, I reckon," returned the other, mounting into his saddle. "But I'll be going. Take care of yourself."

"I'll be all right, Jib!" she responded, with more cheerfulness, and waved her hand to him as the cow puncher rode away.

But when the patter of the pony's hoofs had died away the silence brooding over the aban-

doned mining camp seemed very oppressive indeed. It was not a pleasant prospect that lay before her. Not only was she alone here with the sick man, but she *was* afraid of catching the fever.

The patient on the couch was indeed helpless. He muttered and rolled his head from side to side, and his wild eyes stared at her as though he were fearful of what she might do to him. Ruth bathed his face and hands again and again; and the cool water seemed to quiet him. Occasionally she raised his head that he might drink. There was nothing else she could do for his comfort or betterment until medicines arrived.

She searched the cabin for anything which might belong to him. She did not find his rifle—the weapon with which he had killed the bear in the canyon when Ruth had been in such peril. She did find, however, a worn water-proof knapsack; in it was a handkerchief, or two, a pair of torn socks and an old shirt, beside shaving materials, a comb and brush, and a toothbrush. Not a letter or a scrap of paper to reveal his identity. Yet she was confident that this was the man whom she had hoped to meet when she came West on this summer jaunt.

This was the fellow who had encouraged Uncle Jabez to invest his savings in the Tintacker Mine. It was he, too, who had been to Bullhide and recorded the new papers relating to the claim.

And if he had made way with all Uncle Jabez's money, and the mining property was worthless, Ruth knew that she would never see Briarwood Hall again!

For Uncle Jabez had let her understand plainly that his resources were so crippled that she could not hope to return to school with her friends when the next term opened. Neither she, nor Aunt Alvirah, nor anybody else, could make the old miller change his mind. He had given her one year at the boarding school according to agreement. Uncle Jabez always did just as he said he would; but he was never generous, and seldom even kind.

However, it was not this phase of the affair that so troubled the girl from the Red Mill. It was the identity of this fever-stricken man that so greatly disturbed her. She believed that there was somebody at Silver Ranch who must have a much deeper interest in him than even she felt. And she was deeply troubled by this suspicion. Was she doing right in not sending word to the ranch at once as to her belief in the identity of the man?

The morning was now gone and Ruth would have been glad of some dinner; but in leaving the other herders she and Jib had not expected to remain so many hours from the Rolling River crossing. At least, they expected if they found the man at Tintacker at all, that he would have

played the host and supplied them with lunch. Had Jib been here she knew he could easily have shot a bird, or a hare; there was plenty of small game about. But had she not felt it necessary to remain in close attendance upon the sick man she would have hesitated about going to the outskirts of the camp. Even the possession of Jib's loaded pistol did not make the girl feel any too brave.

Already that morning she had been a witness to the fact that savage beasts lurked in the locality. There might be another puma about. She was not positively in fear of the coyotes; she knew them to be a cowardly clan. But what would keep a bear from wandering down from the heights into the abandoned camp? And Ruth had seen quite all the bears at close quarters that she wished to see. Beside, this six-shooter of Jib's would be a poor weapon with which to attack a full-grown bear.

It must be late in the afternoon before any of the boys could ride over from the Rolling River outfit. She set her mind firmly on *that*, and would not hope for company till then. It was a lonely and trying watch. The sick man moaned and jabbered, and whenever she touched the old coat he used for a pillow, he became quite frantic. Perhaps, as Jib intimated, there was something valuable hidden in the garment.

"Deeds—or money—perhaps both," thought the girl nurse. "And maybe they relate to the Tintacker Mine. Perhaps if it is money it is some of Uncle's money. Should I try to take it away from him secretly and keep it until he can explain?"

Yet she could not help from thinking that perhaps Jib was right in his diagnosis of the case. The man might be too far gone to save. Neither physician nor medicines might be able to retard the fever. It seemed to have already worn the unfortunate to his very skeleton. If he died, would the mystery of the Tintacker Mine, and of Uncle Jabez's money, ever be explained?

Meanwhile she bathed and bathed again the fevered face and hands of the unfortunate. This was all that relieved him. He was quiet for some minutes after each of these attentions. The water in the bucket became warm, like that in the canteen. Ruth thought she could risk going to the rivulet for another supply. So she stuck the barrel of the gun into her belt and taking the empty pail set out to find the stream.

She closed the door of the sick man's cabin very carefully. It was not far to the water and she had filled the pail and was returning when she heard a scratching noise nearby, and then a low growl. Casting swift glances of apprehension all about her, she started to run to the cabin;

but when she got to the trail, it was at the cabin door the peril lay!

It was no harmless, cowardly coyote this time. Perhaps it had not been a coyote who had dug there when she and Jib rode up to the camp. She obtained this time a clear view of the beast.

It was long, lean and gray. A shaggy beast, with pointed ears and a long muzzle. When he turned and glared at her, growling savagely, Ruth was held spellbound in her tracks!

"A wolf!" she muttered. "A wolf at the door!"

The fangs of the beast were exposed. The jaws dripped saliva, and the eyes seemed blood-red. A more awful sight the girl had never seen. This fierce, hungry creature was even more terrifying in appearance than the bear that had chased her in the canon. He seemed, indeed, more savage and threatening than the puma that Jib had roped that forenoon as they rode over to Tintacker.

He turned squarely and faced her. He was not afraid, but seemed to welcome her as an antagonist worthy of his prowess. He did not advance, but he stood between Ruth and the door of the sick man's cabin. She might retreat, but in so doing she would abandon the unfortunate to his fate. And what that fate would be she could not doubt when once she had glimpsed the savage aspect of the wolf.

CHAPTER XXI

A PLUCKY FIGHT

RUTH had already set down the bucket of water and drawn the heavy pistol from her belt. The girls had been trying their skill with six-shooters at the ranch at odd times, and she knew that she stood a good chance of hitting the big gray wolf at ten or twelve yards. The beast made no approach; but his intention of returning to the door of the cabin where the sick man lay, if she did not disturb him, was so plain that Ruth dared not desert the helpless patient!

The wolf crouched, growling and showing his fangs. If the girl approached too near he would spring upon her. Or, if she fired and wounded him but slightly she feared he would give chase and pull her down in a few seconds. She very well know that she could not hope to distance the beast if once he started to pursue her.

This was indeed a dreadful situation for a tenderly nurtured girl. The wolf looked to be fully as large as Tom Cameron's mastiff, Reno. And Ruth wished with all her heart (as this compari-

son flashed through her mind) that the mastiff was here to give battle to the savage beast.

But it were vain to think of such impossibilities. If anything was to be done to drive off the wolf at the cabin door, she must do it herself. Yet she dared not make the attack here in the open, and afoot. If she approached near enough to him to make her first shot sure and deadly, the beast gave every indication of opening the attack himself.

And, indeed, he might spring toward her at any moment. He was growing impatient. He had scented the helpless man inside the shack and—undisturbed—would soon burrow under the door and get at him. Although not so cowardly as a coyote, the wolf seldom attacks human beings unless they are helpless or the beast is driven to desperation by hunger. And gaunt as this fellow was, there was plenty of small game for him in the chapparel.

Thus, Ruth was in a quandary. But she saw plainly that she must withdraw or the wolf would attack. She left the bucket of water where it stood and withdrew back of the nearest hut. Once out of the wolf's sight, but still holding the revolver ready, she looked hastily about. Her pony, hobbled by Jib, had not wandered far. Nor had Freckles seen or even scented the savage marauder.

Ruth spied him and crept away from the vicinity of the wolf, keeping in hiding all the time. She soon heard the beast clawing at the bottom of the door and growling. He might burst the door, or dig under it, any moment now!

The last few yards to the pony Ruth made at a run. Freckles snorted his surprise; but he knew her and was easily caught. The frightened girl returned the revolver to her belt and removed the hobbles. Then she vaultd into the saddle and jerked the pony's head around, riding at a canter back toward the cabin.

The wolf heard her coming and drew his head and shoulders back out of the hole he had dug. In a few minutes more he would be under the door and into the cabin, which had, of course, no floor but the hard-packed clay. He started up and glared at the pony and its rider, and the pony began to side-step and snort in a manner which showed plainly that he did not fancy the vicinity of the beast.

"Whoa, Freckles! Steady, boy!" commanded Ruth.

The cow pony, trained to perfection, halted, with his fore feet braced, glaring at the wolf. Ruth dropped the reins upon his neck, and although he winced and trembled all over, he did not move from the spot as the girl raised the heavy pistol, resting its barrel across her left

forearm, and took the best aim she could at the froth-streaked chest of the wolf.

Even when the revolver popped, Freckles did not move. The wolf sprang to one side, snarling with rage and pain. Ruth saw a streak of crimson along his high shoulder. The bullet had just nicked him. The beast snapped at the wound and whirled around and around in the dust, snarling and clashing his teeth.

But when the girl tried to urge Freckles in closer, the wolf suddenly took the aggressive. He sprang out into the trail and in two leaps was beside the whirling pony. Freckles knew better than to let the beast get near enough to spring for his throat. But the pony's gyrations almost unseated his rider.

Ruth fired a second shot; but the bullet went wild. She could not take proper aim with the pony dancing so; and she had to seize the lines again. She thrust the pistol into the saddle holster and grabbed the pommel of the saddle itself to aid her balance. Freckles pitched dreadfully, and struck out, seemingly with all four feet at once, to keep off the wolf. Perhaps it was as well that he did so, for the beast was maddened by the smart of the wound, and sought to tear the girl from her saddle.

As Ruth allowed the pony to run off from the shack for several rods, the wolf went growling

back to the door. He was a persistent fellow and it did seem as though he was determined to get at the sick man in spite of all Ruth could do.

But the girl, frightened as she was, had no intention of remaining by to see such a monstrous thing happen. She controlled Freckles again, and rode him hard, using the spurs, straight at the door of the shack. The wolf whirled and met them with open jaws, the saliva running from the sides of his mouth. His foreleg was now dyed crimson.

Freckles, squealing with anger, jumped to reach the wolf. He had been taught to ride down coyotes, and he tried the same tactics on this fellow. The wolf rolled over, snapping and snarling, and easily escaped the pony's hard hoofs. But Ruth urged the pony on and the wolf was forced to run.

She tried her best to run him down. They tore through the main street of what had been Tintacker Camp, and out upon the open ridge. The wolf, his tail tucked between his legs, scurried over the ground, keeping just ahead, but circling around so as to get back to the abandoned town. He would not be driven from the vicinity.

"I must try again to shoot him," exclaimed the girl, much worried. "If I ride back he will follow me. If I hobble Freckles again, he may attack the pony; and Freckles could not defend himself

so well if he were hobbled. And if I turn the pony loose the wolf may run him off entirely!"

She drew Jib's pistol once more and tried to get a good shot at the wolf. But while she did this she could not keep so sharp an eye on the course the pony took and suddenly Freckles sunk one forefoot in a hole.

He plunged forward, and Ruth came very near taking a dive over his head. She saved herself by seizing the pommel with both hands; but in so doing she lost the gun. Freckles leaped up, frightened and snorting, and the next moment the wolf had made a sharp turn and was almost under the pony's feet!

The wolf let out an unmistakable yelp of pain and limped off, howling. Freckles kept on in pursuit and the revolver was soon far behind. The beast she pursued was now in a bad way; but the girl dared not ride back to search for her lost weapon. She did not propose that the wolf —after such a fight—should escape. Ruth was bent upon his destruction.

The wolf, however, dodged and doubled, so that the pony could not trample it, even had he wished to come to such close quarters. The clashing teeth of the savage animal warned Freckles to keep his distance, however; and it was plain to Ruth that she must dismount to finish the beast. If only she had some weapon——

What was that heap on the prairie ahead? Bones! hundreds of them! Some accident had befallen a bunch of cattle here in the past and their picked skeletons had been flung into a heap. The wolf ran for refuge behind this pile and Ruth immediately urged Freckles toward the spot.

She leaped from the saddle, tossing the bridle reins over his head upon the ground and ran to seize one of the bigger bones. It was the leg bone of a big steer and it made a promising club.

But even as she seized upon this primitive weapon the wolf made a final stand. He appeared around the far side of the pile. He saw that the girl was afoot, and with a snarl he sprang upon her.

Ruth uttered an involuntary shriek, and ran back. But she could not reach Freckles. The wolf's hot breath steamed against her neck as she ran. He had missed her by a hair!

The girl whirled and faced him, the club poised in both her hands, determined to give battle. Her situation was perilous in the extreme. Afoot as she was, the beast had the advantage, and he knew this as well as she did. He did not hurry, but approached his victim with caution—fangs bared, jaws extended, his wounds for the moment forgotten.

CHAPTER XXII

SERVICE COURAGEOUS

THERE was no escape from the wolf's attack, even had Ruth desired to evade the encounter. The beast's flaming eyes showed his savage intention only too plainly. To turn and run at this juncture would have meant death for the brave girl. She stood at bay, the heavy bone poised to strike, and let the creature approach.

He leaped, and with all her strength—and that was not slight—she struck him. The wolf was knocked sideways to the ground. She followed up the attack with a second and a third blow before he could recover his footing.

The wound in his shoulder had bled a good deal, and Freckles' hard hoofs had crippled one leg. He could not jump about with agility, and although he was no coward, he was slow in returning to the charge.

When he did, Ruth struck again, and with good effect. Again and again she beat him off. He once caught her skirt and tore it from the waist-binding; but she eluded his powerful claws

and struck him down again. Then, falling upon him unmercifully, she beat his head into the hard ground until he was all torn and bleeding and could not see to scramble at her.

It was an awful experience for the girl; but she conquered her antagonist before her strength was spent. When he lay, twitching his limbs in the final throes, she staggered back to where her pony stood and there, leaning upon his neck, sobbed and shook for several minutes, while Freckles put his soft nose into her palm and nuzzled her comfortably.

"Oh, oh, Freckles! what a terrible thing!" she sobbed. "He's dead! he's dead!"

She could say nothing more, nor could she recover her self-possession for some time. Then she climbed into the saddle and turned the pony's head toward the deserted huts without once looking back at the blood-bedabbled body and the gory club.

At the camp, however, she was once more her own mistress. The fact that she must attend the sick man bolstered up her courage. She hobbled Freckles again and recovered the bucket of water. John Cox (if that was his name) raged in his fever and clutched at his precious coat, and was not quiet again until she had cooled his head and hands with the fresh water.

After that he fell into a light sleep and Ruth

went about the cabin, trying to set the poor furniture to rights and removing the debris that had collected in the corners. Every few moments she was at the door, looking out for either enemy or friend. But no other creature confronted her until the sound of pony hoofs delighted her ear and Tom Cameron and Jane Ann, with two of the cowboys from the Rolling River outfit, dashed up to the shack.

"Ruth! Ruth!" cried the ranchman's niece, leaping off of her pony. "Come out of that place at once! Do as I tell you——"

"Don't come here, dear—don't touch me," returned her friend, firmly. "I know what I am about. I mean to stay and nurse this man. I do not believe there is so much danger as Jib says——"

"Uncle Bill will have his hide!" cried Jane Ann, indignantly. "You wait and see."

"It is not his fault. I came in here when he could not stop me. And I mean to remain. But there is no use in anybody else being exposed to contagion—if there *is* any contagion in the disease."

"Why, it's as bad as small-pox, Ruth!" cried Jane Ann.

"I am here," returned Ruth, quietly. "Have you brought us food? And is that spirits in the bottle Mr. Darcy has?"

"Yes, Miss," said the cowboy.

"Set it down on that stone—and the other things. I'll come and get it. A few drops of the liquor in the water may help the man a little."

"But, dear Ruth," interposed Tom, gravely, "he is nothing to you. Don't run such risks. If the man must be nursed *I'll* try my hand——"

"Indeed you shall not!"

"It's a job for a man, Miss," said Darcy, grimly. "You mount your pony and go home with the others. I'll stay."

"If any harm is done, it's done already," declared the girl, earnestly. "One of you can stay outside and help me—guard me, if you please. There's been an awful old wolf about——"

"A wolf!" gasped Tom.

"But I killed him." She told them how and where. "And I lost Jib's gun. He'll be furious."

"He'll lose more than his little old Colts," growled the second cowboy.

"It was not Jib's fault," declared the girl. "I could not so easily find my way back to the river as he. I had to stay while he went for help. Has word been sent on to the ranch?"

"Everything will be done that can be done for the fellow, of course," Jane Ann declared. "Uncle Bill will likely come over himself. Then there *will* be ructions, young lady."

"And what will Helen and the other girls say?" cried Tom.

"I wish I had thought," murmured Ruth. "I would have warned Jib not to let Mary know."

"What's that?" asked Tom, in surprise, for he had but imperfectly caught Ruth's words.

"Never mind," returned the girl from the Red Mill, quickly.

The others were discussing what should be done. Ruth still stood in the doorway and now a murmur from the bed called her turn back into the shack to make the unfortunate on the couch more comfortable—for in his tossings he became more feverish and hot. When she returned to the outer air the others had decided.

"Darcy and I will remain, Ruth," Tom said, with decision. "We'll bring the water, and cook something for you to eat out here, and stand guard, turn and turn about. But you are a very obstinate girl."

"As long as one is in for it, why increase the number endangered by the fever?" she asked, coolly. "You are real kind to stay, Tom—you and Darcy."

"You couldn't get me away with a Gatling gun," said Tom, grimly. "You know *that*, Ruth."

"I know I have a staunch friend in you, Tommy," she said, in a low voice.

"One you can trust?"

"To be sure," she replied, smiling seriously at him.

"Then what is all this about Mary Cox? What has *she* got to do with the fellow you've got hived up in that shack?" shot in Master Tom, shrewdly.

"Oh, now, Tommy!" gasped Ruth.

"You can't fool me, Ruth——"

"Sh! don't let the others hear you," she whispered. "And don't come any nearer, Tom!" she added, warningly, and in a louder tone.

"But The Fox has something to do with this man?" demanded Tom.

"I believe so. I fear so. Oh, don't ask me any more!" breathed the girl, anxiously, as Jane Ann and the cowboy rode up to say good-bye.

"I hope nothing bad will come of this, Ruth," said the ranch girl. "But Uncle Bill will be dreadfully mad."

"Not with me, I hope," rejoined Ruth, shaking her head.

"And all the girls will be crazy to come out here and help you nurse him."

"They certainly *will* be crazy if they want to," muttered Tom.

"They would better not come near here until the man gets better—if he ever *does* get better," added Ruth, in a low tone.

"I expect they'll all want to come," repeated Jane Ann.

"Don't you let them, Jane Ann!" admonished Ruth. "Above all, don't you let Mary Cox come over here—unless I send for her," and she went into the shack again and closed the door.

CHAPTER XXIII

BASHFUL IKE TAKES THE BIT IN HIS TEETH

THERE was great commotion at Silver Ranch when Jib Pottoway (on a fresh horse he had picked up at the riverside cow camp) rode madly to the ranch-house with the news of what was afoot so far away across Rolling River. From Old Bill down, the friends of Ruth were horror-stricken that she should so recklessly (or, so it seemed) expose herself to the contagion of the fever.

"And for a person who is absolutely nothing to her at all!" wailed Jennie Stone. "Ruth is utterly reckless."

"She is utterly brave," said Madge, sharply.

"She has the most grateful heart in the world," Helen declared. "He saved her life in the canon—you remember it, Mary. Of course she could not leave the poor creature to die there alone."

The Fox had turned pallid and seemed horrified. But she was silent while all the others about the ranch-house, from Old Bill Hicks down to Maria the cook, were voluble indeed. The ranchman might have laid violent hands upon Jib Pot-

toway, only there was so much to do. Such simple medicines as there were in the house were packed to take to Tintacker. Old Bill determined to go over himself, but he would not allow any of the young folks to go.

"And you kin bet," he added, "that you'll see Jane Ann come back here a-whizzin'!"

The unfortunate Jib had enough to do to answer questions. The girls would not let him go until he had told every particular of the finding of the man at Tintacker.

"Was he just *crazy?*" queried Heavy.

"I don't know whether he's been loony all the time he's been hanging around the mines, or not," growled the Indian. "But I'm mighty sure he's loco *now.*"

"If that was him who shot the bear up in the canon that day, he didn't appear to be crazy enough to hurt," said Helen.

"But is this the same man?" queried Mary Cox, and had they not all been so busy pumping Jib of the last particular regarding the adventure, they might have noticed that The Fox was very pale.

When Jib first rode up, however, and told his tale, Bashful Ike Stedman had set to work to run the big touring car out of the shed in which it was kept. During the time the young folk had been at Silver Ranch from the East, the foreman had

learned from Tom and Bob how to run the car. It came puffing up to the door now, headed toward the Bullhide trail.

"What in tarnashun you goin' ter do with that contarption, Ike?" bawled Mr. Hicks. "I can't go to Tintacker in it."

"No, yuh can't, Boss. But I kin go to Bullhide for the sawbones in it, and bring him back, too. We kin git as far as the Rolling River camp in the old steam engine—if she don't break down. Then we'll foller on arter yuh a-hawseback."

"You won't git no doctor to come 'way out there," gasped the ranch owner.

"Won't I?" returned the foreman. "You wait and see. Ruthie says a doctor's got to be brought for that feller, and I'm goin' to git Doc. Burgess if I hafter rope an' hogtie him—you hear me!"

The engine began to pop again and the automobile rolled away from the ranchhouse before Mr. Hicks could enter any further objections, or any of the young folk could offer to attend Ike on his long trip. Fortunately Tom and Bob had seen to it that the machine was in excellent shape, there was plenty of gasoline in the tank, and she ran easily over the trail.

At the Crossing Ike was hailed by Sally Dickson. Sally had been about to mount her pony for a ride, but when the animal saw the automobile

coming along the trail he started on the jump for the corral, leaving Miss Sally in the lurch.

"Well! if that ain't just like you, Ike Stedman!" sputtered the red-haired schoolma'am. "Bringin' that puffin' abomination over this trail. Ain't you afraid it'll buck and throw yuh?"

"I got it gentled—it'll eat right off yuh hand," grinned the foreman of Silver Ranch.

"And I was going to ride in to Bullhide," exclaimed Sally. "I won't be able to catch the pony in a week."

"You hop in with me, Sally," urged Ike, blushing very red. "I'm goin' to Bullhide."

"Go joy-ridin' with *you,* Mr. Stedman?" responded the schoolma'am. "I don't know about that. Are you to be trusted with that automobile?"

"I tell yuh I got it gentled," declared Ike. "And I got to be moving on mighty quick." He told Sally why in a few words and immediately the young lady was interested.

"That Ruth Fielding! Isn't she a plucky one for a Down-East girl? But she's too young to nurse that sick man. And she'll catch the fever herself like enough."

"Hope not," grunted Ike. "That would be an awful misfortune. She's the nicest little thing that ever grazed on *this* range—yuh hear me!"

"Well," said Sally, briskly. "I got to go to

town and I might as well take my life in my hands and go with you, Ike," and she swung herself into the seat beside him.

Ike started the machine again. He was delighted. Never before had Sally Dickson allowed him to be alone with her more than a scant few moments at a time. Ike began to swallow hard, the perspiration stood on his brow and he grew actually pale around the mouth. It seemed to him as though everything inside of him rose up in his throat. As he told about it long afterward, if somebody had shot him through the body just then it would only have made a flesh-wound!

"Sally!" he gasped, before her father's store and the schoolhouse were out of sight.

"Why, Ike! what's the matter with you? Are you sick?"

"N-no! I ain't sick," mumbled the bashful one.

"You're surely not scared?" demanded Sally. "There hasn't anything happened wrong to the automobile?"

"No, ma'am."

"Are you sure? It bumps a whole lot—Ugh! It's not running away, is it?"

"I tell yuh it's tame all right," grunted Ike.

"Then, what's the matter with you, Ike Stedman?" demanded the school-mistress, with considerable sharpness.

"I—I'm suah in love with yuh, Sally! That's what's the matter with me. Now, don't you laugh—I mean it."

"Well, my soul!" exclaimed the practical Sally, "don't let it take such a hold on you, Ike. Other men have been in love before—or thought they was—and it ain't given 'em a conniption fit."

"I got it harder than most men," Ike was able to articulate. "Why, Sally, I love you so hard *that it makes me ache!*"

The red-haired school-mistress looked at him for a silent moment. Her eyes were pretty hard at first; but finally a softer light came into them and a faint little blush colored her face.

"Well, Ike! is that all you've got to say?" she asked.

"Why—why, Sally! I got lots to say, only it's plugged up and I can't seem to get it out," stammered Ike. "I got five hundred head o' steers, and I've proven on a quarter-section of as nice land as there is in this State—and there's a good open range right beside it yet——"

"I never *did* think I'd marry a bunch o' steers," murmured Sally.

"Why—why, Sally, punchin' cattle is about all I know how to do well," declared Bashful Ike. "But you say the word and I'll try any business you like better."

"I wouldn't want you to change your business,

Ike," said Sally, turning her head away. "But—but ain't you got anything else to offer me but those steers?"

"Why—why," stammered poor Ike again. "I ain't got nothin' else but myself——"

She turned on him swiftly with her face all smiling and her eyes twinkling.

"There, Ike Stedman!" she ejaculated in her old, sharp way. "Have you finally got around to offering *yourself?* My soul! if you practiced on every girl you met for the next hundred years you'd never learn how to ask her to marry you proper. I'd better take you, Ike, and save the rest of the female tribe a whole lot of trouble."

"D'ye mean it, Sally?" cried the bewildered and delighted foreman of Silver Ranch.

"I sure do."

"Ye-yi-yip!" yelled Ike, and the next moment the big touring car wabbled all over the trail and came near to dumping the loving pair into the gully.

CHAPTER XXIV

COALS OF FIRE

Once Bashful Ike had taken the bit in his teeth, his nickname never fitted him again. He believed in striking while the iron was hot, Ike did. And before the touring car ran them down into Bullhide, he had talked so hard and talked so fast that he had really swept Miss Sally Dickson away on the tide of his eloquence, and she had agreed to Ike's getting the marriage license and their being wedded on the spot!

But the foreman of Silver Ranch found Dr. Burgess first and made the physician promise to accompany him to Tintacker. The doctor said he would be ready in an hour.

"Gives us just about time enough, Sally," declared the suddenly awakened Ike. "I'll have that license and we'll catch Parson Brownlow on the fly. Come on!"

"For pity's sake, Ike!" gasped the young lady. "You take my breath away."

"We ain't got no time to fool," declared Ike. And within the hour he was a Benedict and Sally Dickson had become Mrs. Ike Stedman.

"And I'm going over to Tintacker with you,

Ike," she declared as they awaited before the doctor's office in the big automobile. "That poor fellow over there will need somebody more'n Ruth Fielding to nurse him. It takes skill to bring folks out of a fever spell. I nursed Dad through a bad case of it two year ago, and I know what to do."

"That's all right, Sally," agreed Ike. "I'll make Old Bill give me muh time, if need be, and we'll spend our honeymoon at Tintacker. I kin fix up one of the old shacks to suit us to camp in. I don't wish that poor feller over there any harm," he added, smiling broadly at the pretty girl beside him, "but if it hadn't been that he got this fever, you an' I wouldn't be married now, honey."

"You can thank Ruth Fielding—if you want to be thankful to anybody," returned Sally, in her brisk way. "But maybe you won't be so thankful a year or two from now, Ike."

Dr. Burgess came with his black bag and they were off. The automobile—as Sally said herself—behaved "like an angel," and they reached Silver Ranch (after halting for a brief time at the Crossing for Sally to pack *her* bag and acquaint Old Lem Dickson of the sudden and unexpected change in her condition) late at night. Old Bill Hicks was off for Tintacker and the party remained only long enough to eat and for Bob

Steele to go over the mechanism of the badly-shaken motor-car.

"I'll drive you on to the river myself, Ike," he said. "You are all going on from there on horseback, I understand, and I'll bring the machine back here."

But when the newly-married couple and the physician had eaten what Maria could hastily put before them, and were ready to re-enter the car, Mary Cox came out upon the verandah, ready to go likewise.

"For pity's sake, Mary!" gasped Heavy. "You don't want to ride over to the river with them."

"I'm going to those mines," said The Fox, defiantly.

"What for?" asked Jane Ann, who had arrived at the ranch herself only a short time before.

'That's my business. I am going," returned The Fox, shortly.

"Why, you can't do any such thing," began Jane Ann; but Mary turned to Ike and preferred her request:

"Isn't there room for me in the car, Mr. Stedman?"

"Why, I reckon so, Miss," agreed Ike, slowly.

"And won't there be a pony for me to ride from the river to Tintacker?"

"I reckon we can find one."

"Then I'm going," declared Mary, getting promptly into the tonneau with the doctor and Sally. "I've just as good a reason for being over there—maybe a better reason for going—than Ruth Fielding."

None of her girl friends made any comment upon this statement in Mary's hearing; but Madge declared, as the car chugged away from the ranchhouse:

"I'll never again go anywhere with that girl unless she has a change of heart! She is just as mean as she can be."

"She's the limit!" said Heavy, despondently. "And I used to think she wasn't a bad sort."

"And once upon a time," said Helen Cameron, gravely, "I followed her leadership to the neglect of Ruth. I really thought The Fox was the very smartest girl I had ever met."

"But she couldn't hold the Up and Doing Club together," quoth the stout girl.

"Ruth's Sweetbriars finished both the Upedes and the Fussy Curls," laughed Madge, referring to the two social clubs at Briarwood Hall, which had been quite put out of countenance by the Sweetbriar Association which had been inaugurated by the girl from the Red Mill.

"And The Fox has never forgiven Ruth," declared Heavy.

"What she means by forcing herself on this party at Tintacker, gets my time!" exclaimed Jane Ann.

"Sally will make her walk a chalk line if she goes over there with her," laughed Helen. "Think of her and Ike getting married without a word to anybody!"

Jane Ann laughed, too, at that. "Sally whispered to me that she never would have taken Ike so quick if it hadn't been for what we did at the party the other night. She was afraid some of the other girls around here would see what a good fellow Ike was and want to marry him. She's always intended to take him some time, she said; but it was Ruth that settled the affair at that time."

"I declare! Ruth *does* influence a whole lot of folk, doesn't she?" murmured Heavy. "I never saw such a girl."

And that last was the comment Dr. Burgess made regarding the girl of the Red Mill after the party arrived at Tintacker. They reached the mine just at daybreak the next morning. Mary Cox had kept them back some, for she was not a good rider. But she had cried and taken on so when Sally and Ike did not want her to go farther than the river, that they were really forced to allow her to continue the entire journey.

Dr. Burgess examined the sick man and pro-

nounced him to be in a very critical condition. But he surely had improved since the hour that Ruth and Jib Pottoway had found him. Old Bill Hicks had helped care for the patient during the night; but Ruth had actually gone ahead with everything and—without much doubt, the doctor added—the stranger could thank her for his life if he *did* recover.

"That girl is all right!" declared the physician, preparing to return the long miles he had come by relays of horses to the ranchhouse, and from thence to Bullhide in the automobile. "She has done just the right thing."

"She's a mighty cute young lady," admitted Bill Hicks. "And this chap—John Cox, or whatever his name is—ought to feel that she's squared things up with him over that bear business——"

"Then you have learned his name?" queried Tom Cameron, who was present.

"I got the coat away from him when he was asleep in the night," said Mr. Hicks. "He had letters and papers and a wad of banknotes in it. Ruth's got 'em all. She says he is the man with whom her Uncle Jabez went into partnership over the old Tintacker claims. Mebbe the feller's struck a good thing after all. He seems to have an assayer's report among his papers that promises big returns on some specimens he had assayed. If he dug 'em out of the Tintacker Claim mebbe

the old hole in the ground will take on a new lease of life."

At that moment Mary Cox pushed forward, with Sally holding her by the arm.

"I've got to know!" cried The Fox. "You must tell me. Does the—the poor fellow say his name is Cox?"

"Jest the same as yourn, Miss," remarked Old Bill, watching her closely. "Letters and deeds all to 'John Cox.'"

"I know it! I feared it all along!" cried The Fox, wringing her hands. "I saw him in the canon when he shot the bear and he looked so much like John——"

"He's related to you, then, Miss?" asked the doctor.

"He's my brother—I know he is!" cried Mary, and burst into tears.

CHAPTER XXV

AT THE OLD RED MILL AGAIN

THE mist hovered over the river as though loth to uncover the dimpling current; yet the rising sun was insistent—its warm, soft September rays melting the jealous mist and uncovering, rod by rod, the sleeping stream. Ruth, fresh from her bed and looking out of the little window of her old room at the Red Mill farmhouse, thought that, after all, the scene was quite as soothing and beautiful as any of the fine landscapes she had observed during her far-western trip.

For the Briarwood Hall girls were back from their sojourn at Silver Ranch. They had arrived the night before. Montana, and the herds of cattle, and the vast canons and far-stretching plains, would be but a memory to them hereafter. Their vacation on the range was ended, and in another week Briarwood Hall would open again and lessons must be attended to.

Jane Ann Hicks would follow them East in time to join the school the opening week. Ruth looked back upon that first day at school a year ago when she and Helen Cameron had become "Infants" at Briarwood. They would make it

easier for Jane Ann, remembering so keenly how strange they had felt before they attained the higher classes.

The last of the mist rolled away and the warm sun revealed all the river and the woods and pastures beyond. Ruth kissed her hand to it and then, hearing a door close softly below-stairs, she hurried her dressing and ran down to the farmhouse kitchen. The little, stooping figure of an old woman was bent above the stove, muttering in a sort of sing-song refrain:

"Oh, my back! and oh, my bones!"

"Then let somebody else save your back and bones, Aunt Alviry!" cried Ruth, putting her arms around the old housekeeper's neck. "There! how good it is to see you again. Sit right down there. You are to play lady. *I* am going to get the breakfast."

"But your Uncle Jabez wants hot muffins, my pretty," objected Aunt Alvirah.

"And don't you suppose anybody can make muffins but you?" queried Ruth, blithely. "I made 'em out to Silver Ranch. Maria, the Mexican cook, taught me. Even Uncle Jabez will like them made by my recipe—now you see if he doesn't."

And the miller certainly praised the muffins—by eating a full half dozen of them. Of course, he did not say audibly that they were good.

And yet, Uncle Jabez had a much more companionable air about him than he had ever betrayed before—at least, within the knowledge of Ruth Fielding. He smiled—and that not grimly—as the girl related some of her experiences during her wonderful summer vacation.

"It was a great trip—and wonderful," she sighed, finally. "Of course, the last of it was rather spoiled by Mary Cox's brother being so ill. And the doctors found, when they got the better of the fever, that his head had been hurt some months before, and that is why he had wandered about there, without writing East—either to his folks or to you, Uncle Jabez. But he's all right now, and Mary expects to bring him home from Denver, where he stopped over, in a few days. She'll be home in time for the opening of school, at least," and here Ruth's voice halted and her face changed color, while she looked beseechingly at Uncle Jabez.

The miller cleared his throat and looked at her. Aunt Alvirah stopped eating, too, and she and Ruth gazed anxiously at the flint-like face of the old man.

"I got a letter from that lawyer at Bullhide, Montana, two days ago, Niece Ruth," said Uncle Jabez, in his harsh voice. "He has been going over the Tintacker affairs, and he has proved up on that young Cox's report. The young chap is

as straight as a string. The money he got from me is all accounted for. And according to the assayers the new vein Cox discovered will mill as high as two hundred dollars to the ton of ore. If we work it as a stock company it will make us money; but young Cox being in such bad shape physically, and his finances being as they are, we'll probably decide to sell out to a syndicate of Denver people. Cox will close the contract with them before he comes East, it may be, and on such terms," added Uncle Jabez with a satisfaction that he could not hide, "that it will be the very best investment I ever made."

"Oh, Uncle!" cried Ruth Fielding.

"Yes," said Uncle Jabez, with complacency. "The mine is going to pay us well. Fortunately you was insistent on finding and speaking to young Cox. If you had not found him—and if he had not recovered his health—it might have been many months before I could have recovered even the money I had put into the young man's scheme. And—so he says—*you* saved his life, Ruthie."

"That's just talk, Uncle," cried the girl. "Don't you believe it. Anybody would have done the same."

"However that may be, and whether it is due to you in any particular that I can quickly realize on my investment," said the miller, rising suddenly from the table, "circumstances are such

now that there is no reason why you shouldn't have another term or two at school—if you want to go."

"*Want to go to Briarwood!* Oh, Uncle!" gasped Ruth.

"Then I take it you *do* want to go?"

"More than anything else in the world!" declared his niece, reverently.

"Wall, Niece Ruth," he concluded, with his usual manner. "If your Aunt Alviry can spare ye——"

"Don't think about me, Jabez, don't think about me," cried the little old woman. "Just what my pretty wants—that will please her Aunt Alviry."

Ruth ran and seized the hard hand of the miller before he could get out of the kitchen. "Oh, Uncle!" she cried, kissing his hand. "You *are* good to me!"

"Nonsense, child!" he returned, roughly, and went out.

Ruth turned to the little old woman, down whose face the tears were coursing unreproved.

"And you, too, Auntie! You are too good to me! Everybody is too good to me! Look at the Camerons! and Jennie Stone! and all the rest. And Mary Cox just hugged me tight when we came away and said she loved me—that I had saved her brother's life. And Mr. Bill Hicks—

and Jimsey and the other boys. And Bashful Ike and Sally made me promise that if ever I could get out West again I should spend a long time at their home——

"Oh, dear, me Aunt Alvirah," finished the girl of the Red Mill, with a tearful but happy sigh, "this world is a very beautiful place after all, and the people in it are just lovely!"

There were many more adventures in store for Ruth, and what some of them were will be related in the next volume of this series, to be entitled: "Ruth Fielding on Cliff Island; Or, The Old Hunter's Treasure Box," in which will be related the particulars of a most surprising mystery.

"Only one Ruthie!" mused old Jabez. "Only one, but she's quite a gal—yes, quite a gal!"

And we agree with him; don't we, reader?

THE END

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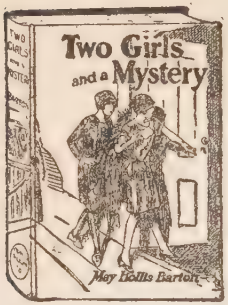

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